HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION for MIGRATION ECONOMICS

Home sweet home?

Work, life and well-being of foreign domestic workers in Singapore



Research Report (abridged version)

March 2015

Executive summary

Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) are indispensable to many households in Singapore and make important contributions to the economy and community. However, they encounter strict legal and institutional constraints and are vulnerable to exploitative structures and oppressive working and living conditions. This poses threats to their mental well-being, which is influenced by individual characteristics, socio-economic circumstances and the broader environment.

Due to the lack of generalizable research on the mental well-being of FDWs in Singapore, this study sought to address the following **research questions**:

1. *What individual characteristics and social circumstances describe working and living conditions of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?*
2. *What are the prevalence and severity of mental health problems among working foreign domestic workers in Singapore?*
3. *What is the relationship between mental well-being, and individual characteristics and social circumstances of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?*

Apart from identifying and reporting working and living conditions of FDWs as well as their state of well-being, this report also provides recommendations for key stakeholders and the broader community on improving the mental well-being of FDWs. Social and economic benefits of these recommendations are also discussed.

Data was collected from 670 employed FDWs, mainly from the three major sending countries, Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar, via a cross-sectional quantitative survey. The questionnaire was self-administered in three languages, namely English, Bahasa Indonesia and Burmese.

With respect to **individual characteristics and social circumstances describing working and living conditions** of foreign domestic workers in Singapore, we report the following key results:

- Participants earned an average monthly salary of SGD515. Independent of the employment time with their current employer, Filipino workers received a higher income than Indonesian and Burmese FDWs respectively.
- Participants worked an average of 13 hours daily and slept for eight hours each night on average.
- 40% of the respondents did not have a weekly day off.
- A majority of employers kept their FDW's passport (67%) or employment contract (60%).
- Around one-third of the FDWs (32%) experienced difficulties due to language barriers when communicating with their employer or employer's family, whereby Burmese workers have more communication problems compared to the other nationalities.
- 27% of the respondents faced some form of invasion of privacy (most commonly by searching the FDW's room, checking the FDW's belongings or phone) at least once by their employer or employer's family.
- 73% of the respondents experienced some form of restriction on communication by their employer or employer's family at least once (mostly by not being allowed to make private phone calls, talk to people outside the employer's family and/or from the FDW's home country).
- 74% of the participants faced some form of restriction on movement by their employer or employer's family at least once (most frequently by not letting the FDWs leave the house freely, and/or locking her in the house or a room).
- In terms of nutritional attention, most of the women (83%) always received "enough food". 18% of the participants were never given "good food" (i.e. left-overs, expired food etc.). 13% of the surveyed women never received food that was appropriate for their religion or culture. Burmese FDWs are more likely to experience overall nutritional neglect compared to the other nationalities.

- Around half of the respondents (54%) received adequate medical attention and less than half (43%) received adequate dental attention by their employer.
- 35% of the participants experienced some form of economic abuse (mostly in form of late salary payments) at least once. 51% of the respondents faced some form of verbal abuse (mainly in form of scolding/nagging, yelling/screaming/ shouting and calling names) at least once. 6% of the respondents had been exposed to some form of physical abuse (most commonly by someone throwing objects at her) at least once. 7% of the respondents experienced some form of moral abuse (in form of insulting comments on their faith or belief(s) at least once. 7% of respondents were victims of sexual abuse (mostly in form of improper sexual comments) at least once by their employer or employer's family.
- 16% of the participants had contact with friends and relatives in Singapore less than once a week and 23% communicated with family and friends in their home country or outside Singapore less than once a week. Burmese FDWs are less likely to have weekly contact with friends and family in Singapore or in their home country compared to the other nationalities.
- 81% of the respondents did not visit their home country on a yearly basis, and 12% visited their home country less than once every two years.
- The most common contact persons for FDWs faced with emotional problems(s) were friends or family in Singapore (43%), followed by the employer (38%) and family and friends outside Singapore or in the FDWs' home country (25%). Burmese FDWs more often do not seek external help at all, while Filipino FDWs are more likely to ask for help from others when experiencing emotional problems.
- 59% of the participants did not always feel privacy in their current employer's house.
- Approximately half of the respondents (47%) did not always feel integrated into their current employer's family, i.e. treated as a family member.
- 65% of the respondents were not always treated with dignity by their employer or employer's family.
- 85% of the participants had some form of concerns and worries about their family (mostly about their children in their home country).
- Only one-third of the participants (30%) never suffered from homesickness.

Concerning the **prevalence and severity of mental health problems** among working FDWs in Singapore, the study revealed the following key findings:

- Overall, the results indicate an elevated level of mental distress among the FDW population in Singapore. More than two out of every 10 participants (24%) could be classified as having poor mental health. Compared to worldwide and Singapore statistics, FDWs in Singapore are doubly at risk to develop mental health problems.
- When compared to a reference population the relative most severe psychological symptoms concerned "psychoticism" (a mental state of 'losing contact with reality', including symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, grandiosity, paranoia or catatonia), followed by "depression" (which includes persistent low mood, self-esteem, loss of interest and pleasure, and hope), and "interpersonal sensitivity" (that defines feelings of personal inadequacy and inferiority, particularly in comparison with others). The level of mental distress related to "psychotic" symptoms suggests that professional treatment is required.

In terms of the **relationship between mental well-being, and individual characteristics and social circumstances** describing working and living conditions of foreign domestic workers in Singapore, several factors proved to be significantly related to mental health:

- For all FDWs, the most important protective factors, which are beneficial for good mental well-being are a perceived sense of integration into the employer's family, a perceived feeling of

privacy in the employer's house, a positive perception of being treated with dignity by and a high level of satisfaction with their current employer or employer's family and with working in Singapore. Sufficient rest, having one's own room to sleep in, adequate nutritional and medical attention by the employer and having a stable social network are also crucial for good mental health.

- Risk factors, which are most detrimental to FDW's psychological well-being, include language-related communication barriers and abusive behaviors (especially verbal and physical) by the employer or employer's family. Invasions of privacy or restrictions of communication by the employer or employer's family are also harmful to the FDWs' mental health. Finally, debt, physical illness, homesickness or worries about their families at home can impair the mental health of FDWs.

Based on these findings, our **recommendations for key stakeholders** for better protection of Singapore's FDW population are:

Recommendations for **foreign domestic workers:**

- FDWs should be encouraged to be proactive and approach friends, family and organizations such as HOME for help when experiencing homesickness, distress, family concerns or a mental health problem.
- FDWs should learn the language of the host family, most typically English and/or Chinese (Mandarin).

Recommendations for **employers:**

- Employers of FDWs in Singapore should learn some useful phrases of their FDW's native language, maintain open channels of communication and strive to treat their employees professionally and with respect at all times.
- Employers of FDWs should ensure a full weekly rest day and limit working hours during the day for their FDWs.
- FDWs should not be deprived of a phone to maintain contact with friends and family.

Recommendations for the **Singapore government:**

- Domestic workers should be covered by the Employment Act and Work Injury Compensation Act.
- Set limits on FDWs working hours and ensure they are entitled to public holidays and annual leave.
- Paid sick leave and adequate and comprehensive medical and dental care should be made compulsory.
- The right to a weekly rest day should be strictly enforced and it should be 24 hours.
- Implement regulations, which protect domestic workers' privacy.
- Take steps to make verbal abuse a reportable offence and communicate a zero-tolerance stance towards the abuse of FDWs in any form.
- Enforce the right of domestic workers to hold their passport and identity documents without fear of retaliation from employers and employment agents.
- Allow domestic workers to switch employers freely without having to seek permission from their sponsoring employer.
- Provide live-out options for domestic workers.
- Inspect workplace conditions regularly, especially those of newly arrived FDWs, through visits and private interviews with migrant domestic workers, coordinating with and involving migrant workers groups, and employment agencies.
- Abolish the SGD5,000 [US2,950] security bond for employers.

- Regulate the excessive fees employment agencies charge domestic workers by strictly enforcing the two-month salary cap and disallow agencies from imposing 'loans' on FDWs to recover costs.
- Employment agencies in Singapore should create recommended pay scales according to work experience and other relevant qualifications, such as education, and to abolish discriminatory practices that determine entry-level wages according to nationality.
- The Association of Employment Agencies Singapore and CaseTrust should develop counseling and conflict resolution courses for its members and the attendance of these courses should be a licensing requirement.
- Bilateral and multilateral cooperation with source countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, should be promoted to ensure more effective protection of FDWs from the deceptive, coercive and abusive behaviors of employment agents and employers. Bilateral agreements, which formalize such efforts, should be signed.
- The Ministry of Social and Family Development should provide resources to Family Service Centres and the newly established Social Service Offices (SSOs) to do outreach, provide counseling and social support for domestic workers.
- Ratify the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention (C189).

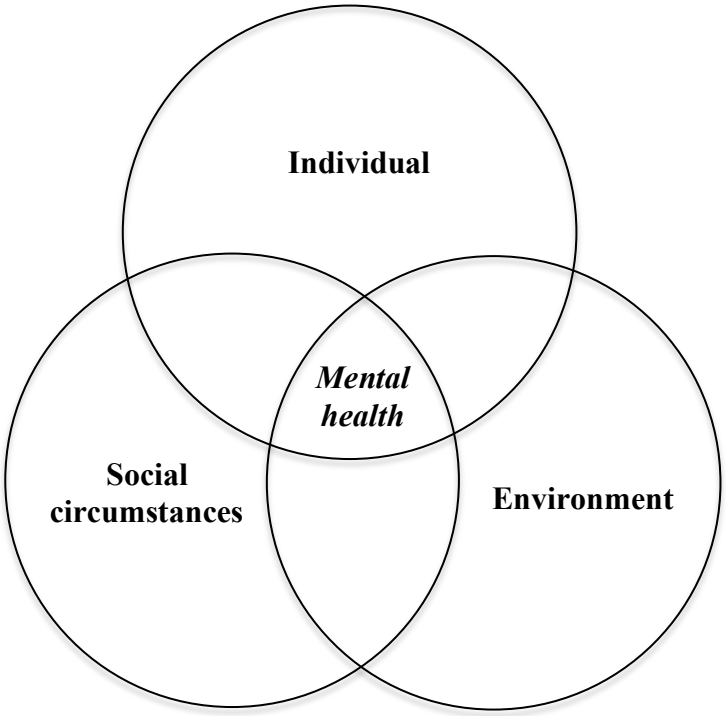
This study is the first of its kind in Singapore and provides detailed insights into the mental health issues faced by FDWs. Overall, results of the study indicate that FDWs in Singapore are especially vulnerable and susceptible to poor mental health and there are clear correlations between FDWs' mental health issues and exploitative, restrictive and/or abusive working and living conditions.

1 Introduction

Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) have played an important role in the lives of Singaporeans and are indispensable to Singapore's economy. Approximately one in five households in Singapore employ FDWs. There are more than 1.3 million documented migrant workers in Singapore, of which approximately 220,000 are FDWs, mainly from Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar. They form a sizeable 16% of Singapore's total foreign workforce. However, these migrant workers encounter strict legal and institutionalized constraints in Singapore and are vulnerable to oppressive conditions and exploitative structures, which can affect their mental well-being.

Mental health or psychological well-being is an integral part of an individual's capacity to lead a fulfilling life, including the ability to study, work or pursue leisure interests, and to make sound decisions on a daily basis. Mental health and illnesses are believed to be a result of a combination of several different factors. Previous research has shown that mental well-being is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by a person's socioeconomic circumstances and their broader environment. Apart from genetic and biological factors, physical illness, poor nutrition, loneliness or difficulties in communicating are some of the individual attributes and behaviors that may threaten mental health. Social circumstances that may influence mental health negatively are, for instance, a lack of social support, neglect, family conflicts, exposure to violence or abuse, low income and poverty/debt, work stress, a low educational level or poor housing and living conditions. Environmental factors can include, but are not limited to, injustice or discrimination, social or gender inequalities (including restrictions in legal or human rights), social exclusion or isolation.

Factors influencing a person's mental well-being



Approximately 10% of the world's population, or 450 million people, are affected by mental health problems. Evidently, mental illnesses are not only a growing public health concern but are also a major social and economic issue affecting individuals and families worldwide. For instance, the Singapore Mental Health Study[1], a nationwide cross-sectional interview study led by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), indicates that one out of 10 Singaporeans (12%) will be affected by mental illness in their lifetime. Additionally, gender, ethnicity, marital status and chronic physical illnesses were found to be associated with mental illness.

Little empirical evidence is available on the mental health of FDWs, despite the growing number of migrant workers worldwide. The few studies on FDWs' mental health conducted in other countries show clear relationships between exploitative, restrictive and/or abusive work conditions and mental health problems. However, available data on FDWs' mental well-being in Singapore is based only on subjective insular reports, anecdotal evidence or qualitative (not generalizable) research. As a result, no representative information is available, rendering it difficult to accurately assess and respond to the mental health issues faced by FDWs in Singapore. Nevertheless, the existing literature and HOME's experience indicate that mental health-related problems are prevalent in Singapore's FDW population.

This study aimed to conduct a quantitative and comprehensive assessment of mental health and psychosocial correlates of employed FDWs in Singapore in order to gain insights into their mental well-being. We seek to provide accurate information about the mental well-being of FDWs in Singapore and contribute to a better protection of FDWs' overall mental health in Singapore by informing decision makers, identifying legal and policy gaps and providing customized mental health treatment information and preventive education.

The study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What individual characteristics and social circumstances describe working and living conditions of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?
2. What are the prevalence and severity of mental health problems among working foreign domestic workers in Singapore?
3. What is the relationship between mental well-being, and individual characteristics and social circumstances of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?

These three research questions also allow for comparisons between the three main nationalities of FDWs in Singapore, namely, Burmese, Indonesian and Filipino.

Overall, this study identified several areas of concern regarding FDWs' working and living conditions. Potential protective and risk factors for mental health of FDWs in Singapore are also established.

[1] Institute of Mental Health (IMH) (2011). *Latest study sheds light on the state of mental health in Singapore.* Media release. Retrieved from https://www.imh.com.sg/uploadedFiles/Newsroom/News_Releases/SMHS%20news%20release.pdf

2 Study design[2]

Data was collected from 670 employed female FDWs from the three major sending countries (i.e. Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar) via a cross-sectional quantitative survey. The questionnaire was self-administered in three languages, namely English, Bahasa Indonesia and Burmese.

The following factors were assessed in relation to the respondents' working and living conditions:

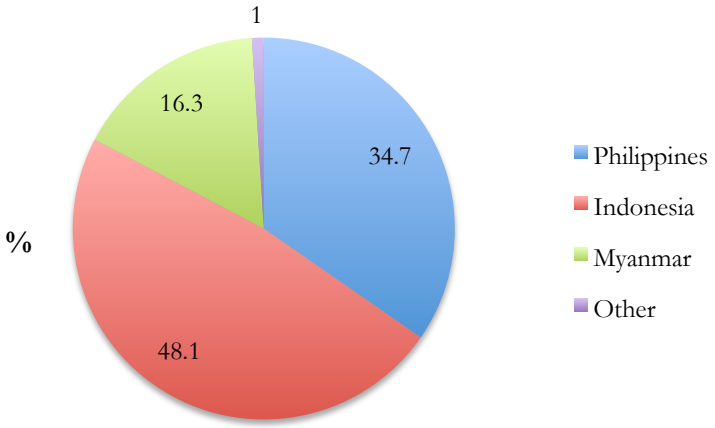
- The FDWs' individual characteristics, including their views on their working and living conditions; and
- Social circumstances, i.e.
    - Employment conditions and working environment,
    - Treatment by their current employer or employer's family, and
    - Social network and support.

No environmental factors capturing social, legal or other circumstances were assessed, as those were defined for all participants by the broader employment conditions and legal policies in Singapore.

Mental health was assessed with the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), a standardized and recognized instrument, which has been used in more than 400 research studies.

The participants were recruited at locations frequented by FDWs around Singapore by our team of volunteer FDWs on Sundays between November 2013 and May 2014. The study was successfully stratified by ethnicity to reflect the majority populations of FDWs in Singapore. Each participant was reimbursed SGD10 for travel and meal expenses.

Participants' countries of origin



[2] Descriptive analyses regarding individual characteristics and social circumstances were performed to define working and living conditions and to establish the mental well-being in the sample.

Statistical relationships between mental health and individual characteristics and social circumstances were examined with correlation and regression analyses. Statistical differences between participants of different countries of origin as well as between mental well-being and FDWs' individual and social factors were tested using non-parametric and parametric techniques.

Statistical significance was evaluated using a confidence level of more than 99% ($p < .01$) using 2-tailed tests.

3 Results

Note: For the first and second research questions, results are based on descriptions within the sample. Findings related to the third research question as well as all to comparisons between FDWs of different nationalities are generalizable, and thus apply to all employed FDWs in Singapore, beyond the surveyed women.

What individual characteristics and social circumstances describe working and living conditions of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?

Individual characteristics

The reported average **age** of the respondents was 33 years.

Regarding the participants' **marital status** almost half of the participants (45%) reported that they were never married (single), 29% were married, 11% were married but separated from their husband, 10% were divorced, 4% were widowed and 0.2% indicated that their marriage was annulled.

Among the participants 54% reported to be mothers with an average of **two children**. The reported average age of the youngest child was 11 years old.

The reported average number of **years of schooling** (after kindergarten) among the FDWs was 11 years.

With respect to their reported **statement of belief**, around half of the participants identified as Muslim (47%), followed by Christians (43%) and Buddhists (9%). Other named creeds (1%) included Hindu, Sikh, Freethinker or no affiliation to a religious belief.

26% of the women indicated to have **previously worked as FDWs in other countries** before coming to Singapore. The three most common named countries of previous employment were Malaysia (28%), Saudi Arabia (12%) and Hong Kong (11%). On average, the respondents reported to have worked in other countries for three years.

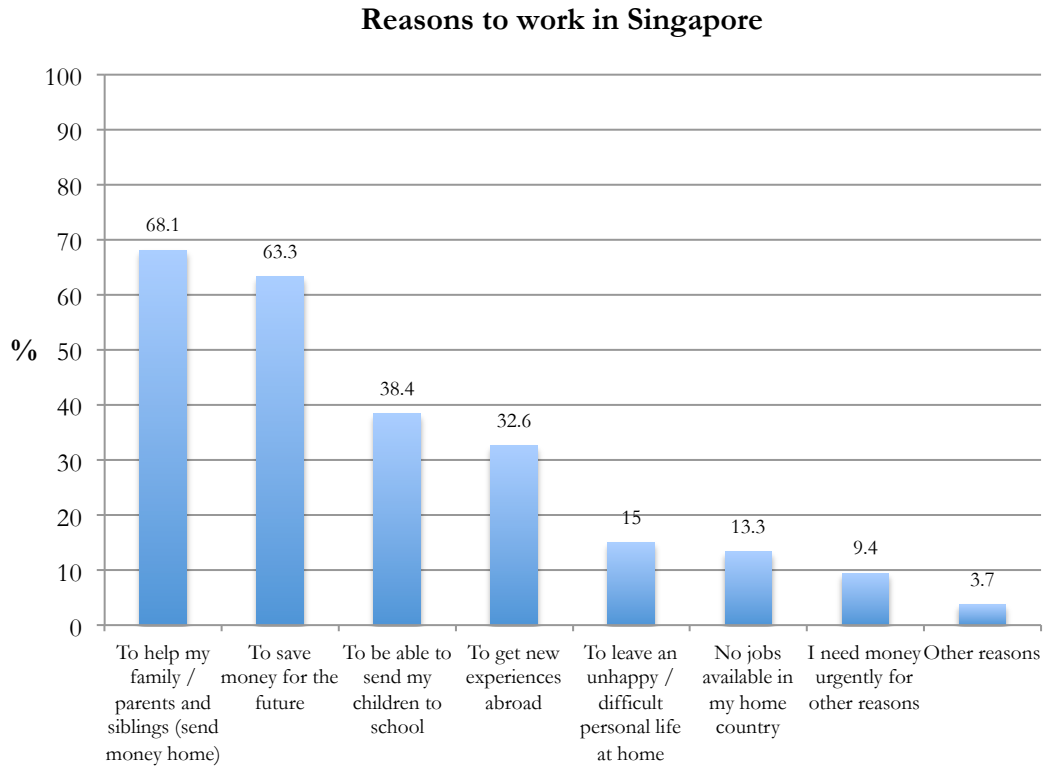
The reported total **working time in Singapore** was six years on average. Participants reported to have worked for a total of two employers during their time in Singapore on average and were employed with their current employer for an average of three years.

Around one-tenth of the respondents reported to be in **debt** in Singapore (13%) or in their home country (12%). The average amount owed in the home country (SGD2340) was approximately double than the amount owed in Singapore (SGD1318).

68% of the surveyed FDWs reported currently using an **employment agency**.

16% of the participants indicated that they were diagnosed with chronic **physical health problems** by a doctor. Most of these participants reported to suffer from chronic pain (29%).

Most of the **reasons to work in Singapore** were related to economic incentives. Respondents indicated that the top three reasons to work in Singapore was "sending money home to my family" (68%), followed by "saving money for the future" (63%) and "being able to send my children to school" (38%). "Other reasons" included, for instance, building a house in their home country, saving for an own business or retirement or a desire to learn the English language (see figure on next page).



Note. Multiple responses were possible.

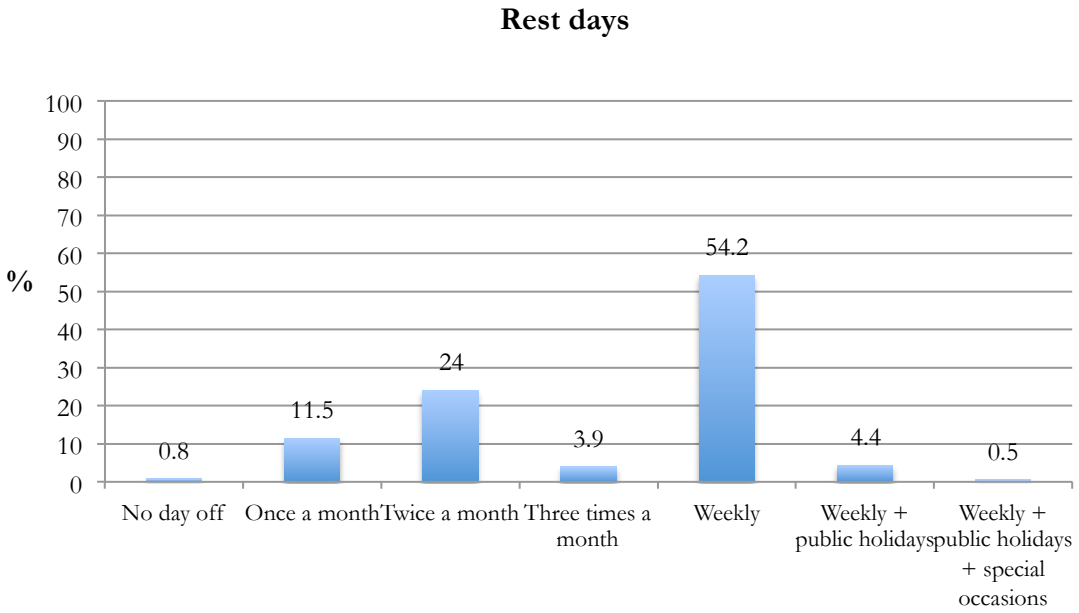
With respect to statistically significant differences between nationalities of FDWs in Singapore (i.e. Indonesian, Filipino and Burmese), findings revealed that:

- *Burmese FDWs are overall the youngest with an average age of 29 years and Filipino FDWs with an average age of 36 years are the oldest group of FDWs in Singapore. Indonesian workers are on average 32 years old.*
- *Indonesian FDWs are less likely to be single than Burmese FDWs. Burmese are less likely to be mothers.*
- *Indonesian FDWs are more likely to be Muslims compared to Filipino and Burmese FDWs. Filipino workers are more likely to be Roman Catholics and Burmese FDWs are more likely to be Buddhists compared the other nationalities. Burmese are also more likely to be Christian compared to Indonesian FDWs.*
- *Both, Filipino and Burmese FDWs have more years of schooling (each on average 12 years) than Indonesians with 10 years average schooling.*
- *Indonesian FDWs are more likely to have previous FDW work experience in other countries than Burmese FDWs.*
- *Filipino FDWs are more likely to have debt and have higher amounts of debt than the other nationalities.*
- *Regarding reasons to work in Singapore, Burmese FDWs are less likely to name "saving money for the future" and "to be able to send their children to school". Indonesian workers are less likely to work as an FDW "to be able to help their family, parents and siblings (send money home)", compared to Burmese FDWs, but are more likely to work in Singapore "to leave an unhappy/ difficult personal life at home" than Filipino FDWs.*
- *Burmese FDWs have been working in Singapore for a shorter average duration (of three years) than Filipino (eight years) and Indonesian FDWs (six years), respectively.*
- *Burmese workers have a shorter average current employment time (of two years) than Indonesian and Filipino FDWs (each four years) correspondingly.*

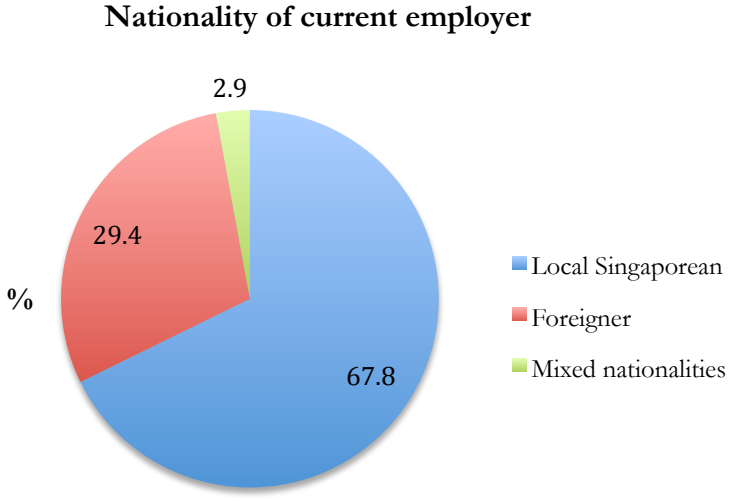
Social circumstances: Employment conditions and working environment

Participants reported an average **monthly salary** of SGD515, with an average of 13 **working hours per day** and an average **sleeping time** of eight hours daily.

Around half of the participants (54%) reported to have a weekly **day-off**. However, 40% of the respondents reported to have a rest day less than once a week.

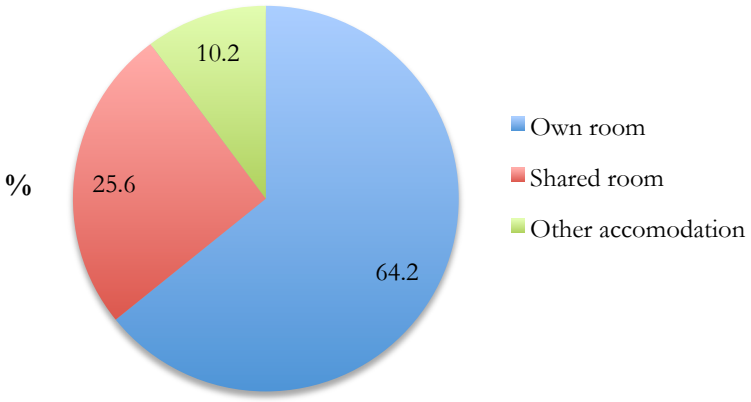


About two-third of the respondents (68%) reported to work for a local Singaporean employer, with the majority of employers being of Chinese descent (80%). The top three countries of origin for foreign employers were reportedly Australia (11%), the United States (10%) and India, China or the United Kingdom (each 6%).



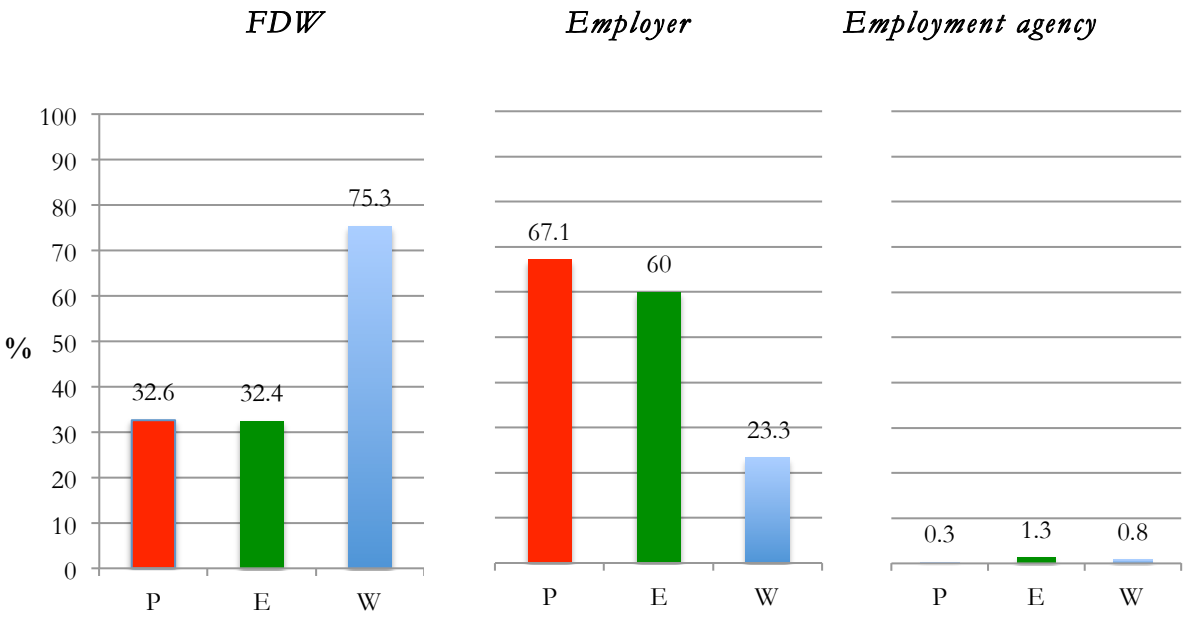
In relation to the participants' **sleeping accommodation**, the majority (64%) reported to have their own room, while about one-fourth (26%) shared a room, mostly with the employer's children or an elderly female person (e.g. the 'ah ma' (grandmother)). 10% indicated that they were given other accommodation, such as the storage room, living room, kitchen or bomb shelter.

Sleeping accommodation



In the majority of cases the FDWs' employers reportedly kept the FDW's **personal documents**, i.e. her passport (67% of passports were in possession of the employer) or her employment contract (60% of these contracts were in possession of the employer). The work permits of the participants were mainly kept by the workers themselves (75%).

Possession of personal documents

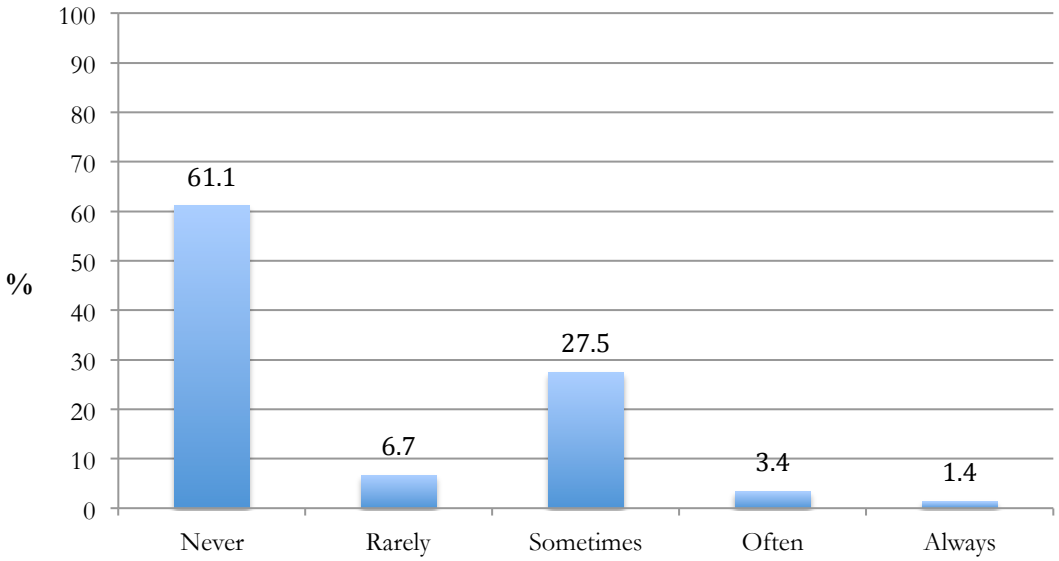


Note: P: Passport, E: employment contract, W: work permit.

Around one-third of the FDWs (32%) experienced sometimes or more often difficulties because of language barriers when communicating with their employer or employer's family.

Language-related communication problems with employer or employer's family

Do you have problems talking with your employer's family because of language?



With respect to differences in nationalities between FDWs in Singapore, key findings suggest that:

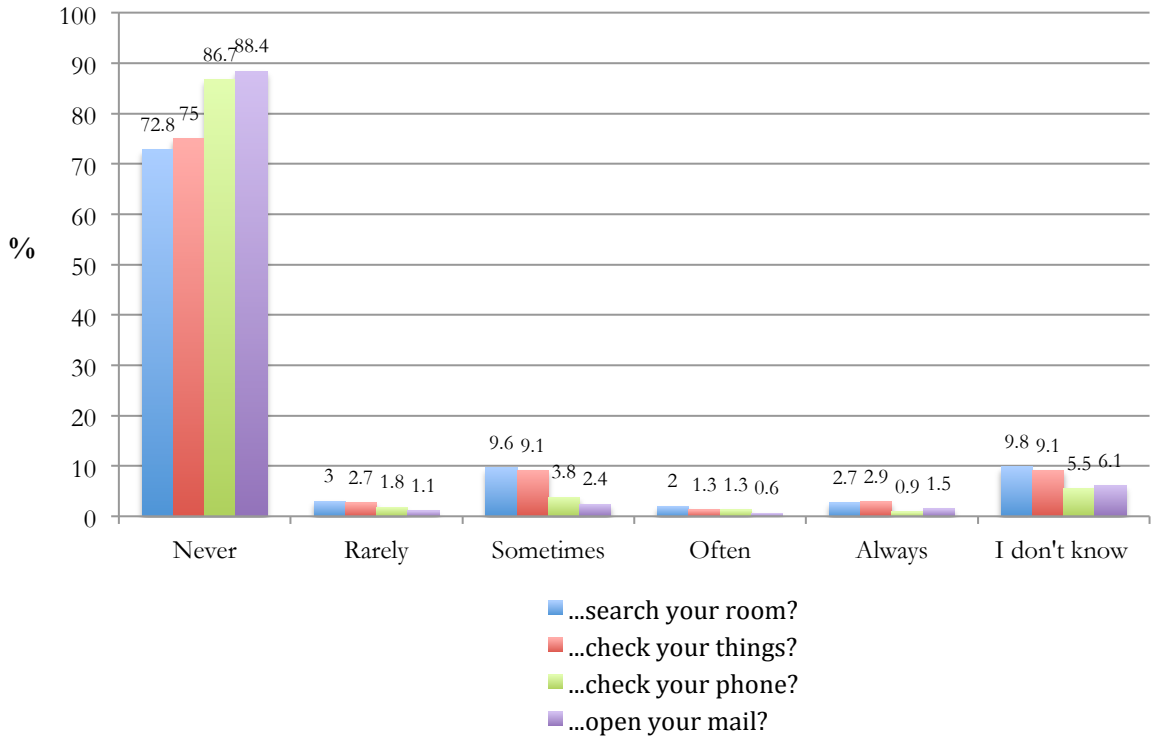
- *Independent of the employment time with their current employer, Filipino workers receive a higher income (on average SGD555) than Indonesian (SGD516) and Burmese (SGD474) FDWs, respectively.*
- *Indonesian FDWs work longer per day (14 hours) than Filipino (13 hours) FDWs. No statistical differences were found between these nationalities and the Burmese workers (working 13 daily hours on average).*
- *Filipino workers are more likely than Indonesian to work for a foreign employer.*
- *As to the possession of personal documents, Filipino FDWs are more likely than Indonesian FDWs to keep their passport themselves. Filipino workers are also more likely than Burmese FDWs to keep their employment contract themselves. Filipino FDWs are more likely than Indonesian and Burmese FDW to be in possession of their work permits.*
- *Burmese workers have more communication problems when talking to the employer's family compared to Indonesian and Filipino FDWs.*

Social circumstances: Treatment by the employer or employer's family

Invasion of privacy includes any offensive or unjustifiable access to one's personal affairs (e.g. intrusion and access to the FDW's phone, mail and/or personal belongings) without her permission and/or knowledge. Overall, 27% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of **invasion of privacy** by their employer or employer's family at least once, most commonly by the employer searching the FDW's room (17%), followed by the employer checking the FDW's belongings (16%), checking her phone (8%) and opening her mail (6%).

Invasion of privacy by employer or employer's family

Does your current employer's family....



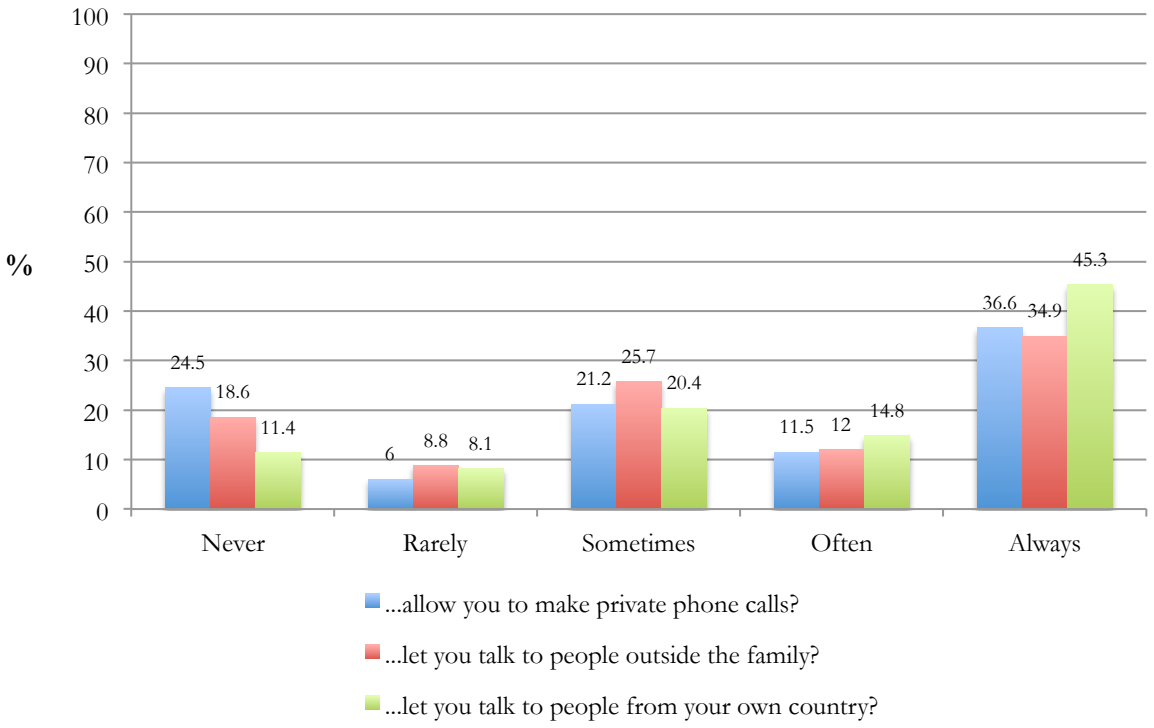
Additionally, 20% of the FDWs reported the existence of **surveillance cameras** in their employers' house. 13% of the respondents stated to not know if there were surveillance cameras installed in their employer's house.

Restriction on communication is a form of control of information and interactions between people, such as not allowing the FDW from contacting friends and relatives Overall, 73% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of **restriction on communication** by their employer or employer's family at least once. Most common examples were not being allowed to make private phone calls (25%), to talk to people outside the employer's family (19%) or to people from the FDWs' home country (11%).

Restriction on movement refers to a private person impeding the free movement of another, including restrictions on leaving the house and/or confinement. 74% of respondents reported experiencing some form of **restriction on movement** by their employer or employer's family at least once. The most common forms of restriction imposed were not allowing the FDW to leave the house freely (25%), followed by locking the FDW in the house (7%) or a room (1%).

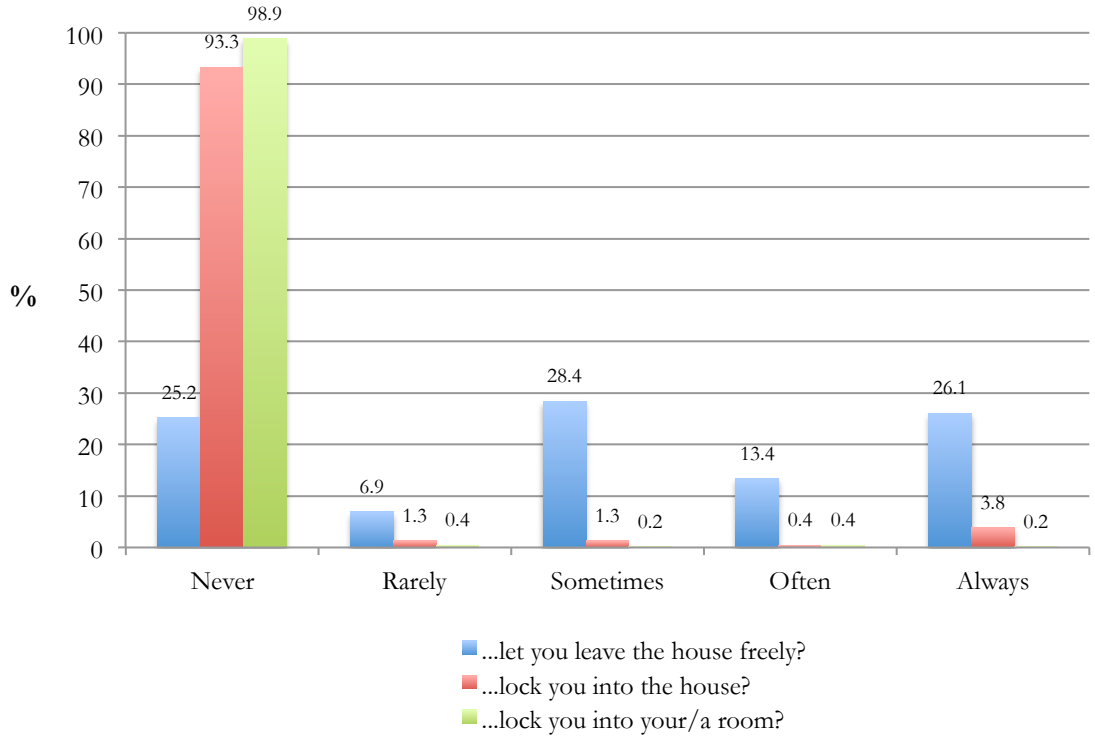
Restriction on communication by employer or employer's family

Does your current employer's family....



Restriction on movement by employer or employer's family

Does your current employer's family....



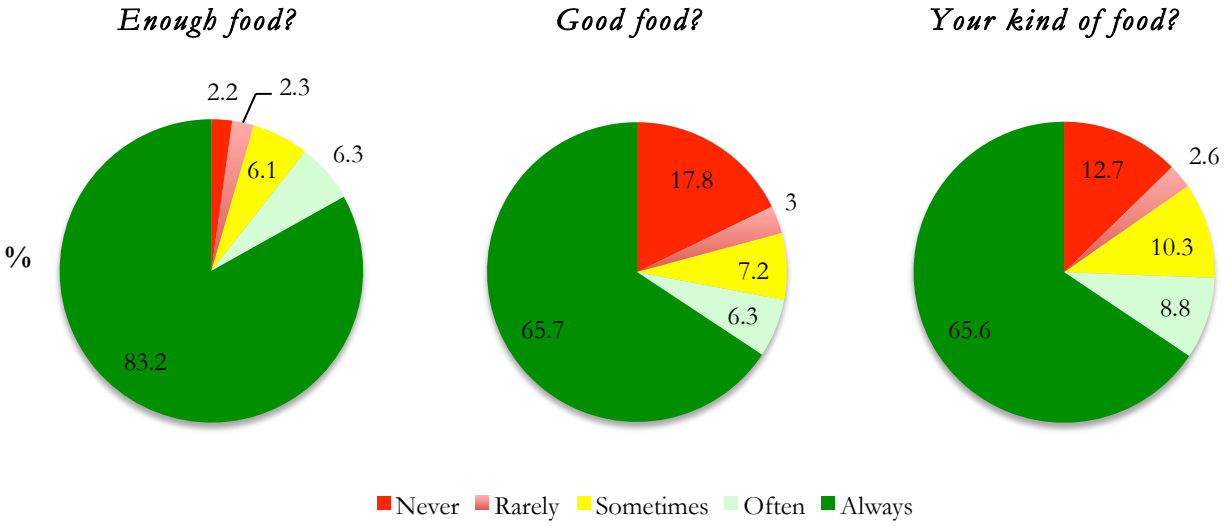
75% of the respondents reported that they had their own key **to the employer's house**.

Neglect is a passive form of abuse in which a caregiver responsible for providing care for a person fails to provide adequate care for the victim's needs, to the detriment of the victim. Examples of neglect include failing to provide sufficient nourishment or medical care for which the victim is helpless to provide for themselves.

As to **nutritional attention**, the participants reported eating three proper meals a day on average. Most of the respondents always received "enough food" (83%). Almost two out of 10 surveyed women (18%) reported that they were never given "good" or high-quality food (e.g. left-overs or expired food). Additionally, 13% of the participants never received "their kind" of food that was appropriate for their culture or religion.

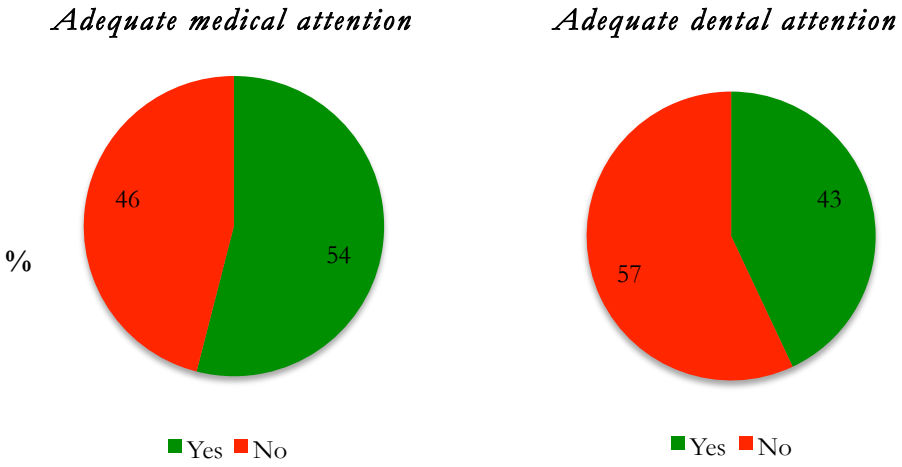
Nutritional attention by employer.

Does your current employer's family give you....



54% of the respondents reported to receive adequate **medical attention** and less than half of the respondents (43%) received adequate **dental attention**.

Medical and dental attention by employer (%)



Overall, 35% of the participants reported being subjected to some form of **economic abuse** at least once. This form of abuse occurs when one has control over another person's access to economic resources which diminishes the victim's capacity to support herself and forces her to depend on the perpetrator financially. The most common form of economic abuse was late salary payment, which 31% of the respondents indicated that they had experienced at least once.

Economic abuse by employer or employer's family

Does your current employer's family…	**Answers in %**				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
…pay your salary at all?	3.1	0.7	1.4	2.3	92.4
…pay your salary late?	69.3	6.7	17.1	3.2	3.7
…deduct salary as punishment?	95.8	0.9	2.2	0.7	0.4
…deny salary as punishment?	98.1	0.4	0.6	0.2	0.7

51% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of **verbal abuse**, a form of abusive behavior involving the use of language that can occur with or without the use of expletives or threats, at least once. The most common verbally abusive behaviors were scolding/nagging (43%), yelling/screaming/ shouting (28%) and calling names (20%).

Verbal abuse by employer or employer's family

Are there any verbal mistreatments by your current employer's family?	**Answers in %**					
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6 or more times	Weekly	Daily
Scold you/nag at you	57.1	30.1	3.9	2.8	1.5	4.8
Yell/scream/shout at you	72.5	16.5	2.6	2.9	1.6	3.6
Call you names (e.g. stupid, lazy)	80.3	11.2	2.2	2.9	1.8	1.6
Threaten to send you back home	88.6	7.2	1.4	0.9	0.9	0.9
Curse at you	89.3	5.7	0.6	1.1	1.1	2.2
Threaten to send you back to your employment agency	92.2	4.2	1.3	0.7	0.5	0.4
Threaten to hurt you	96.4	2.7	0.4	0.5	-	-
Threaten to send you to the police	97.1	2.4	0.5	-	-	-
Threaten to kill you	98.9	0.9	-	0.2	-	-

Moral abuse is abuse of one's character with an embarrassing and/or humiliating effect on the victim. It results in the feeling of being offended, disregarded, belittled, denigrated, subordinated or embarrassed by someone else. 7% of the respondents stated that they were on the receiving end of insulting comments towards their faith or belief at least once. The majority of the participants (94%) reported that they were never morally abused. 5% indicated that they were insulted "1-2 times" and insults "3-5 times", "6 or more times" or "weekly" were each reported by 1% of the respondents.

Physical abuse is an act of abuse involving physical contact intended to cause feelings of physical pain, injury or other physical suffering or bodily harm. 6% of FDWs reported to have been exposed to some form of **physical abuse** at least once. Participants mostly reported physical violence such as throwing objects or pushing/pulling (each 4%) and shoving/poking/pinching (3%).

Physical abuse by employer or employer's family

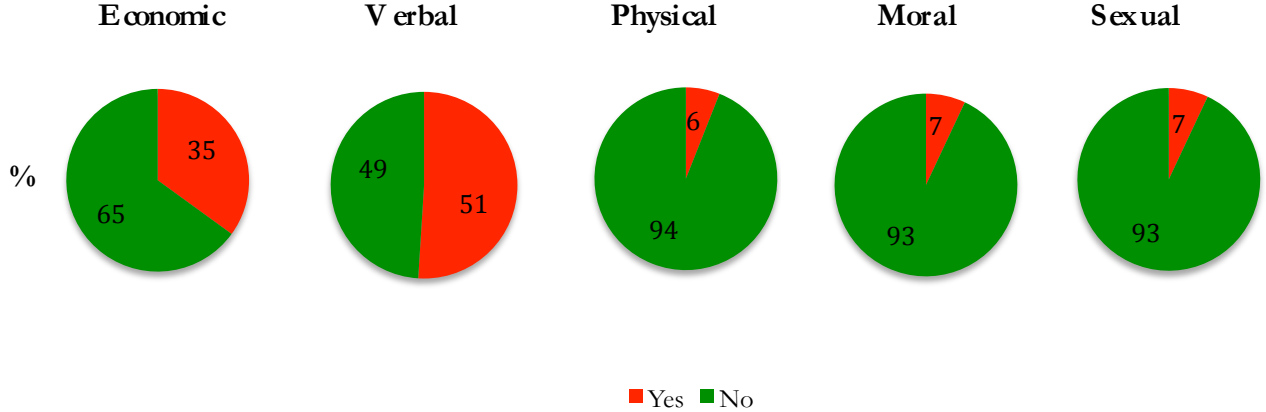
Are there any physical mistreatments by your current employer's family?	Answers in %					
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6 or more times	Weekly	Daily
Throw objects at you	95.8	2.7	0.4	0.5	-	0.5
Push/pull you	96.4	2.4	0.7	0.4	-	0.2
Shove/poke/pinch you	97.1	2	0.4	0.4	-	0.2
Beat/kick you	98.4	0.7	-	0.4	0.2	0.4
Slap/hit you	98.4	0.9	-	0.4	-	0.4
Bite you	98.7	0.7	0.2	0.2	-	0.2
Cut your hair without permission	99.5	0.4	0.2	-	-	-
Choke you	99.6	0.2	0.2	-	-	-

Sexual abuse refers to the forcing of undesired sexual behavior by one person upon another, , when that force falls short of being considered a sexual assault. 7% of the participants reported experiencing **sexual abuse** through improper sexual comments during their current employment at least once.

Are there any sexual mistreatments by your current employer's family?	Answers in %					
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6 or more times	Weekly	Daily
Make improper sexual comments	95.1	3.2	0.5	0.9	-	0.2
Expose themselves in front of you	98.9	0.9	-	0.2	-	-
Show you pornographic movies	99.6	0.2	0.2	-	-	-
Have you touch their private parts	99.6	0.2	-	-	-	0.2
Molest you/touch your private parts	99.6	0.4	-	-	-	-
Kiss you	99.6	0.4	-	-	-	-
Try to rape you	100	-	-	-	-	-
Have you been raped by someone from your employer's family?	100	-	-	-	-	-

The summarized results regarding abusive behavior by the employer or employer's family are shown here:

Existence of abuse by employer or employer's family (overview)



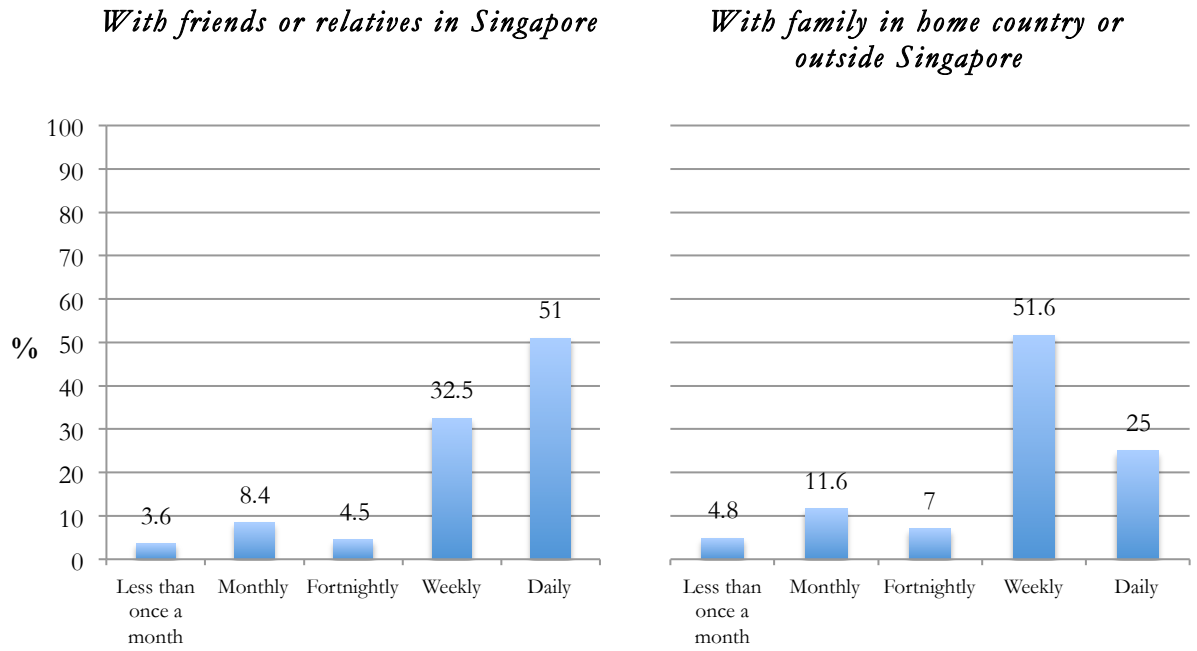
With respect to the differences in nationalities among FDWs in Singapore, key findings suggest that:

- *Burmese workers are more likely than Indonesian FDWs to experience some form of invasion of privacy. No differences were found between these nationalities and Filipino) FDWs.*
- *Filipino FDWs are less likely to experience some form of restriction on communication compared to the other groups.*
- *Indonesian FDWs are more likely than Filipino FDWs to experience some form of restriction on movement. No differences were found between these nationalities and Burmese women.*
- *Burmese FDWs are more likely to experience overall nutritional neglect compared to the other nationalities. Specifically, Burmese are less likely to receive high quality or culturally and religiously adequate food than Filipino and Indonesian FDWs. Furthermore, Burmese workers further eat fewer proper meals a day compared to the other nationalities.*

Social circumstances: Social network and support

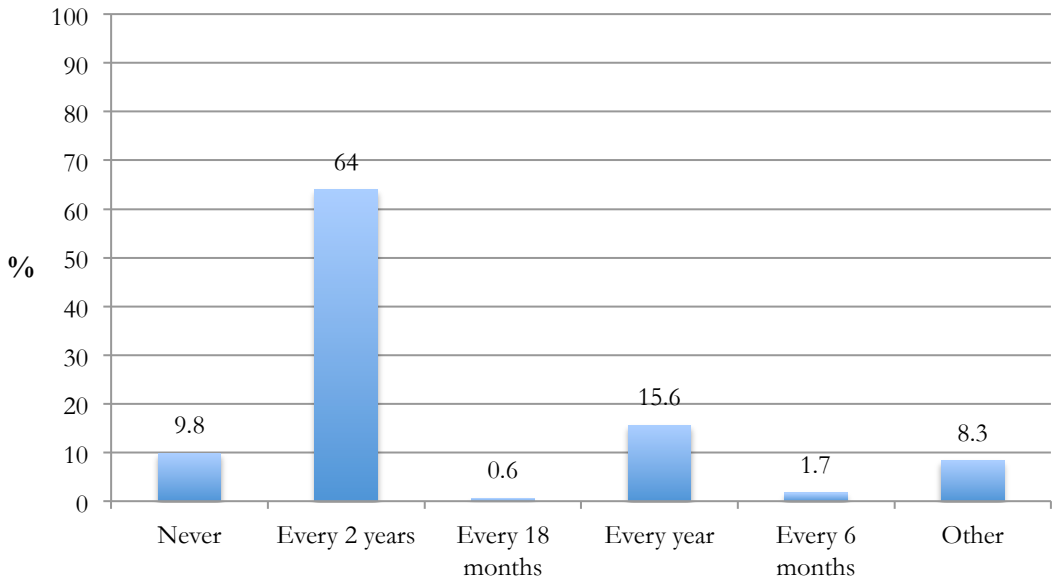
Overall, 84% of the participants reported to have at least weekly **contact with friends and family in Singapore** and 77% stated to have at least weekly **contact with family and friends in their home country or outside Singapore**. However, 4% and 5% of the FDWs reported having contact less than once a month with friends and family within and outside of Singapore, respectively.

Frequency of social contacts



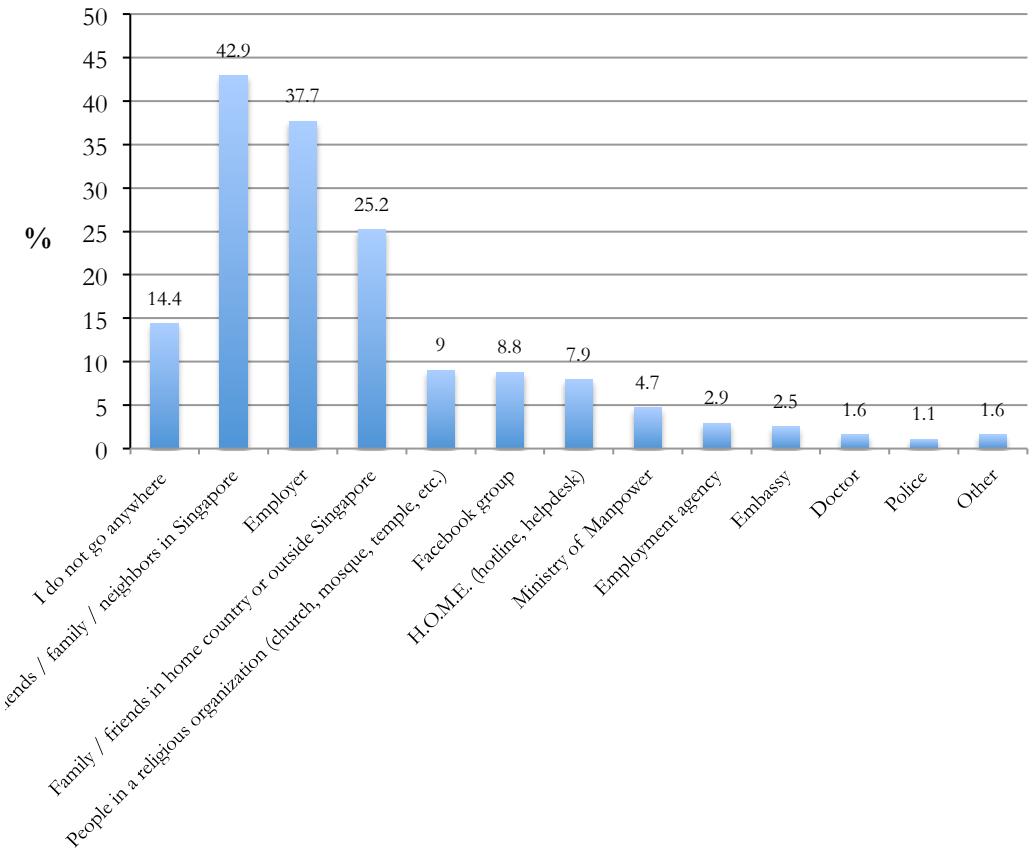
While most of the participants reported **visiting their home country** every two years (64%) or every year (16%), some of the women (10%) stated that they were never able to visit their families back home. Overall, 81% of the respondents reported visiting their home country less than yearly and 12% less than every two years.

Frequency of visits to the FDW's home country



As to **sources of social support when having an emotional problem**, the most common contact person for all surveyed women were friends or family in Singapore (43%), followed by the employer (38%) and family and friends outside Singapore or in the FDW's home country (25%). However, 14% of participants did not seek external help at all when faced with an emotional problem.

Sources of contacts when experiencing emotional problems



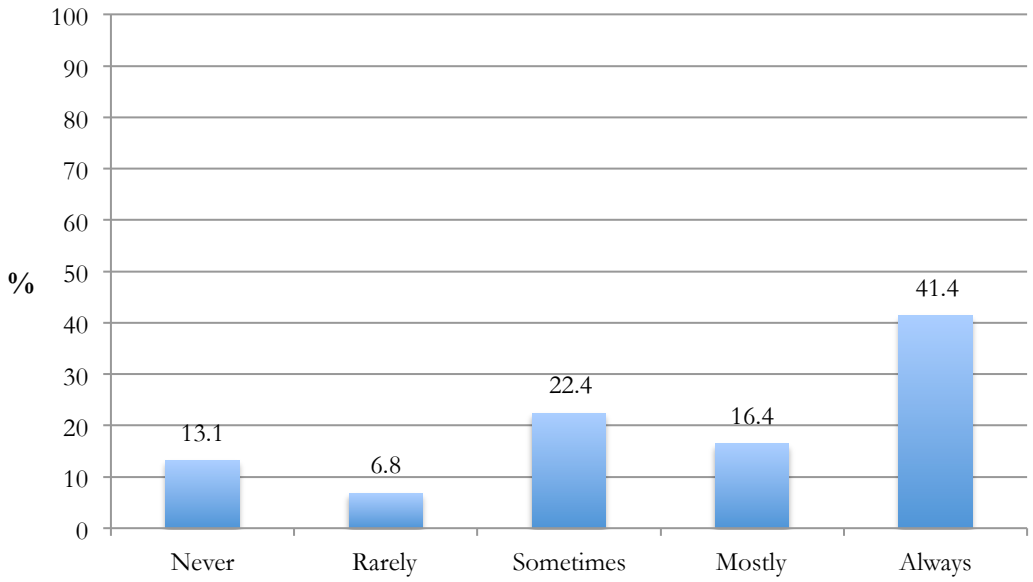
With respect to differences between the three nationalities of FDWs, key findings suggest that:

- *Burmese FDWs are more likely to have less than weekly contact with friends and family in Singapore compared to the other nationalities. Burmese participants are also more likely to have less than weekly contact with their family and friends in their home country or outside Singapore and Filipino FDWs more likely to have at least weekly contact.*
- *Burmese workers are less likely than Filipino FDWs to seek external help when facing an emotional problem. Burmese FDWs are also less likely to go to the employer or to address family or friends in their home country or outside Singapore when experiencing an emotional problem compared to the other nationalities. On the other hand, Filipino FDWs are more likely to search for help via Facebook or to approach religious organizations while Indonesians are less likely to report seeking help from spiritual groups.*

FDWs' views on working and living situation

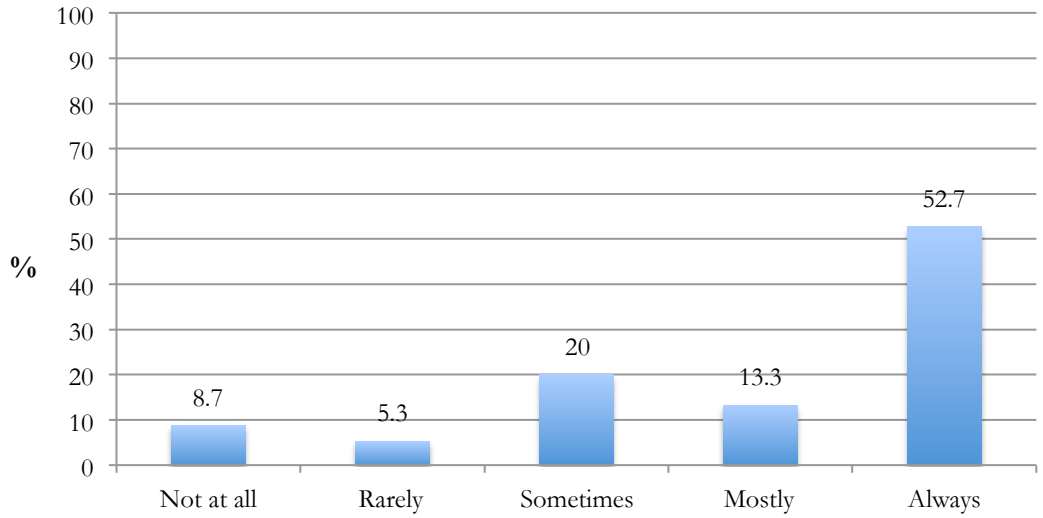
With respect to the **perceived privacy in the employer's house**, 41% of the respondents reported always feeling a sense of privacy in their employer's house. However, the majority (59%) reported experiencing a general breach of perceived privacy in their current employer's house with more than one out of 10 participants (13%) reporting that they never felt a sense of privacy.

Perceived privacy in employer's house



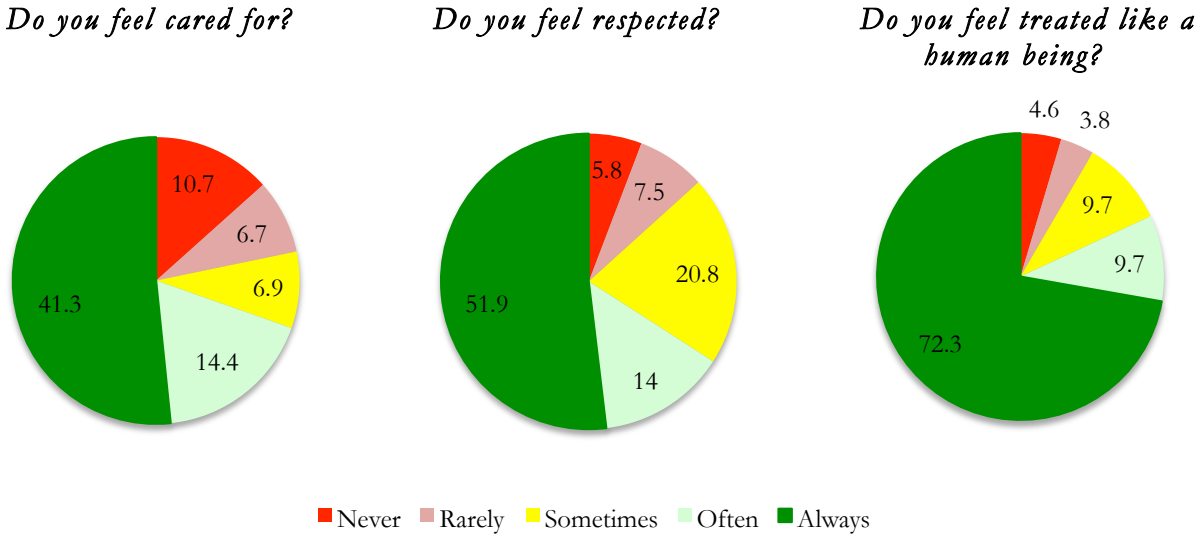
As to the participants' **perceived integration into their employer's family,** i.e. being treated as a family member, around half of the women (53%) reported that they always felt integrated into their current employer's family. 8% of the respondents stated that they never felt integrated into the employer's family.

Perceived integration into employer's family



As for overall **treatment with dignity**, 38% of the participants responded that they were always cared for and felt respected and treated as a human being. However, 65% of the respondents reported that they were not always treated with dignity. Specifically, while 41% of the women responded that they always felt **cared for**, 11% of the FDWs reported that they never felt cared for by their current employer or employer's family. Although around half of the respondents (52%) always felt **respected** by their employer or employer's family, 6% indicated that they never felt respected. The majority (72%) of the FDWs reported that they always felt **treated as a human being** by their employer or employer's family members but 5% indicated that they never felt treated as a human being at their daily workplace.

Perceived treatment with dignity by the employer or employer's family



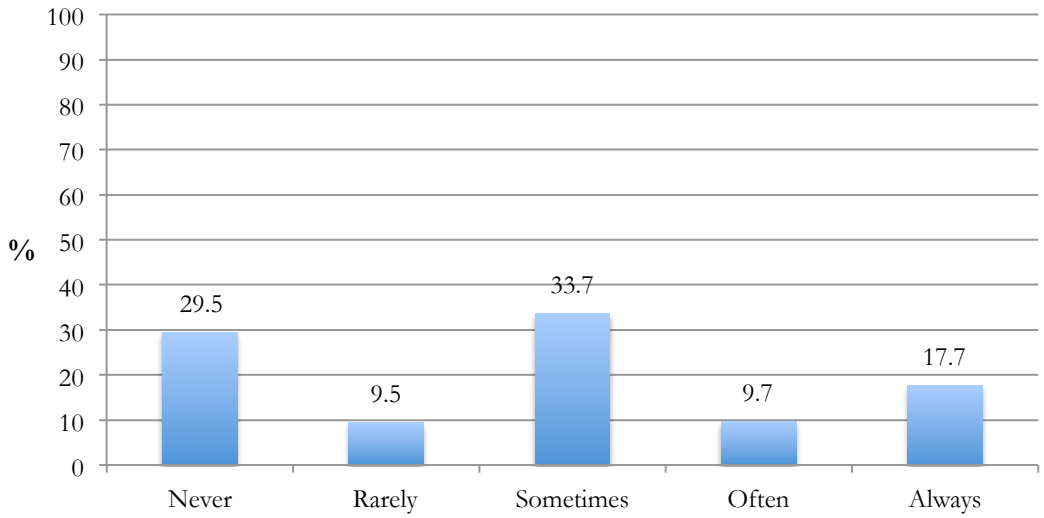
Overall, 85% of the participants reported having some form of **worries or concerns about their family** in their home country. As to the source of their worries, around half of the women (48%) reported they always worried for their children. At the same time, 53% reported that they were never worried about their partner. Regarding the FDWs' worries for other family members, most frequently (34%) women reported to sometimes worry about them.

Family concerns

About your family in your home country or outside Singapore…	Answers in %				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
… I worry about my husband/ boyfriend.	52.5	7.1	27.3	4.4	8.8
… I worry about my children.	9.6	4.6	27.7	10.6	47.5
… I worry about other family members.	23.6	7.7	33.5	9.9	25.4

Regarding the level of **homesickness** among FDWs only one-third of the participants (30%) reported never suffering because they missed their family at home.

Homesickness



In terms of **satisfaction with their employment agency** (if applicable), the majority of the FDWs (60%) reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied. 13% reported that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. As for the level of **satisfaction with their current employer or employer's family,** more than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied. Only 7% stated being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. With respect to the level of **satisfaction with working in Singapore**, majority of FDWs (73%) reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied and only 3% reported that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Finally, with regard to the level of **satisfaction with their social life**, two-thirds of the participants (65%) reported being satisfied or very satisfied. 4% indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied[3].

[3] The finding that migrant workers report a high level of satisfaction is common in research with migrant populations. However, without relating the construct of satisfaction to other variables, it becomes meaningless. For instance, in this study satisfaction was related to very basic physiological and safety needs, such as not being abused by the employer, proper nutritional attention and being paid for work to care for their families at home. Thus, satisfaction needs to be considered in a wider context. Further, social desirable answering behavior due to the party conducting the research and cultural nuances of the investigated population (for instance, not 'losing face') needs to be taken into account when interpreting results related to the assessment of live domains. For this reason participants' satisfaction was primarily analyzed in relation to or precipitating mental health in this study.

With respect to differences in nationalities between the three groups of FDWs, the results indicate that:

- *Filipino workers feel privacy in the employer's house more often than Indonesian FDWs. No differences were found between these nationalities and the Burmese FDWs.*
- *Burmese are less likely to have family concerns compared to the other nationalities.*
- *Filipino FDWs are more satisfied with their current employment agency (if applicable) and with their current employer's family compared to Indonesian FDWs. Further, Filipino workers are more satisfied with their social life than Burmese and Indonesian FDWs.*

Mental health

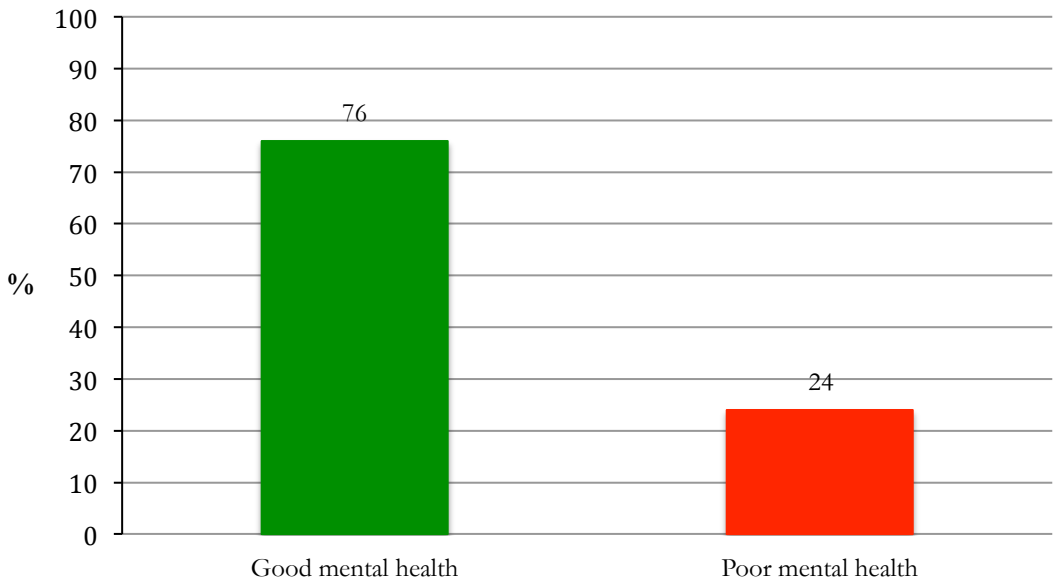
What are the prevalence and severity of mental health problems among working foreign domestic workers in Singapore?

The chosen measure for mental health, the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), provides reference norms for female non-patient populations using standardized T Scores (*Min* = 0, *Max* = 100) to compare the results of the test for one group with other populations. Generally, standardized scores above 60 are considered high, scores from 55-59 are high average, scores of 45-54 are average, scores of 40-44 are low average, and scores 39 and below are considerably below average. To assess the severity of mental health related distress a threshold for suggested treatment is provided. A T-Score of 63 and above either for the overall indicator for mental distress, the Global Severity Index (GSI), or any dimension indicates so-called "caseness", which implies a positive diagnosis requiring treatment. To determine the levels of distress among FDWs in Singapore, the study further utilized available GSI thresholds based on the individual scores on the GSI. Individual respondents who had a GSI score greater than .78 were considered to have poor mental health.

With respect to the **overall level of mental distress** (measured by the GSI), the participants had a standardized score of 59, indicating that the participants experienced a "high average" overall mental distress when compared to a reference norm population.

When applying the standardized threshold to the GSI, 24% of all participants could be classified as having "poor mental health".

Participants with good vs. poor mental health

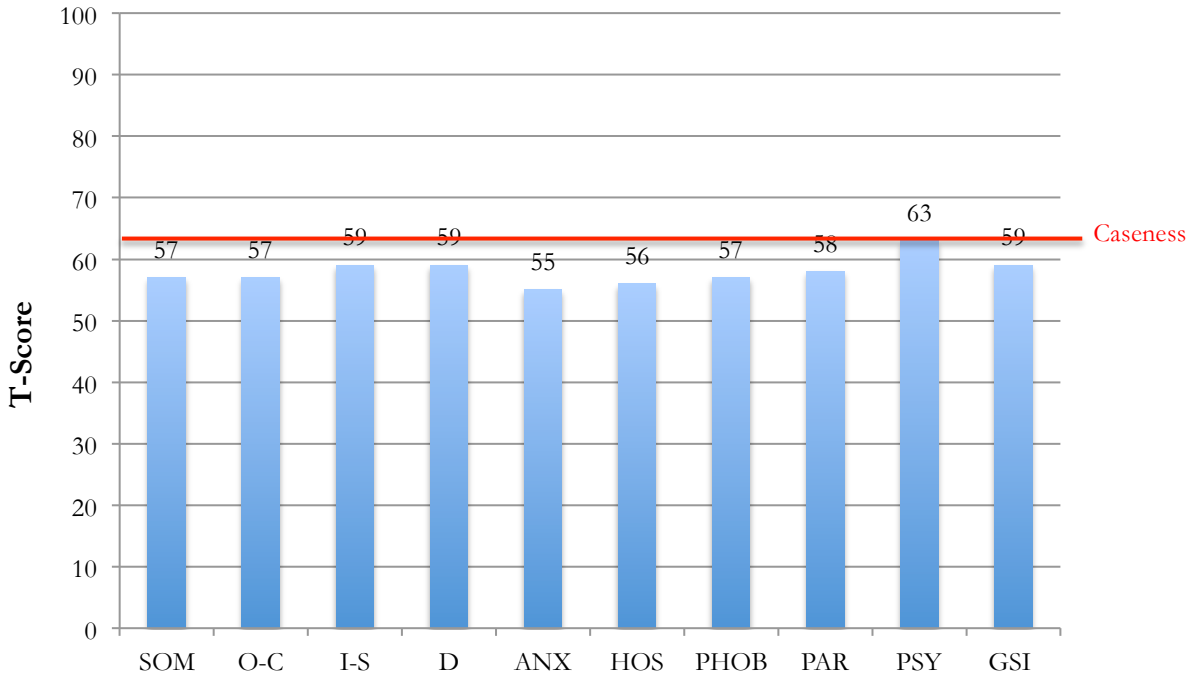


When compared to a reference population, the most severe symptoms were:

1. *Psychoticism*[4],
2. *Depression*[5] and
3. *Interpersonal sensitivity*[6].

The severity of symptoms indicative of *psychoticism* for all FDWs suggests that the level of mental distress in this dimension requires professional attention and treatment (i.e. "caseness").

Psychological symptom dimensions (standardized scores)



Note. SOM = somatization, O-C = obsessive compulsive, I-S = interpersonal sensitivity, D = depression, ANX = anxiety, HOS = hostility, PHOB = phobic anxiety, PAR = paranoid ideation, PSY = psychoticism, GSI = Global Severity Index.

Lastly, analysis of the **individual items** revealed that the items with the highest (raw) scores for all FDWs were (in order):

1. "Having to check and double check what you do" (obsessive-compulsive dimension)
2. "Your feelings being easily hurt" (interpersonal sensitivity dimension)
3. "Feeling lonely" (depression dimension)

[4] Psychoticism is a mental state of 'losing contact with reality', including symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, grandiosity, paranoia or catatonia.

[5] Depression includes persistent low mood, self-esteem, loss of interest and pleasure, and hope.

[6] Interpersonal sensitivity defines feelings of personal inadequacy and inferiority, particularly in comparison with others.

What is the relationship between mental well-being, and individual characteristics and social circumstances of foreign domestic workers in Singapore?

Several individual and social factors which impact on working and living conditions proved to be significantly related to mental health, as indicated by the overall measure for mental distress (GSI) for all FDWs:

The most important **protective factors** which contribute to good mental well-being are perceived integration into the employer's family, perceived sense of privacy in the employer's house, positive perception of being treated with dignity and high level of satisfaction with the current employer or employer's family and working in Singapore. Having sufficient rest, one's own room to sleep in, a stable social network and adequate nutritional and medical attention are crucial for good mental health in FDWs.

R**isk factors,** which may be detrimental to FDWs' mental health are language-related communication barriers and abusive behavior (especially verbal and physical) by the employer or employer's family. Invasions of privacy or restrictions on communication are also harmful to the mental health of FDWs. Further, being in debt, suffering from physical illness, homesickness or worries about their families at home are risk factors for the FDWs' mental well-being.

Mental health: Protective and risk factors for all FDWs

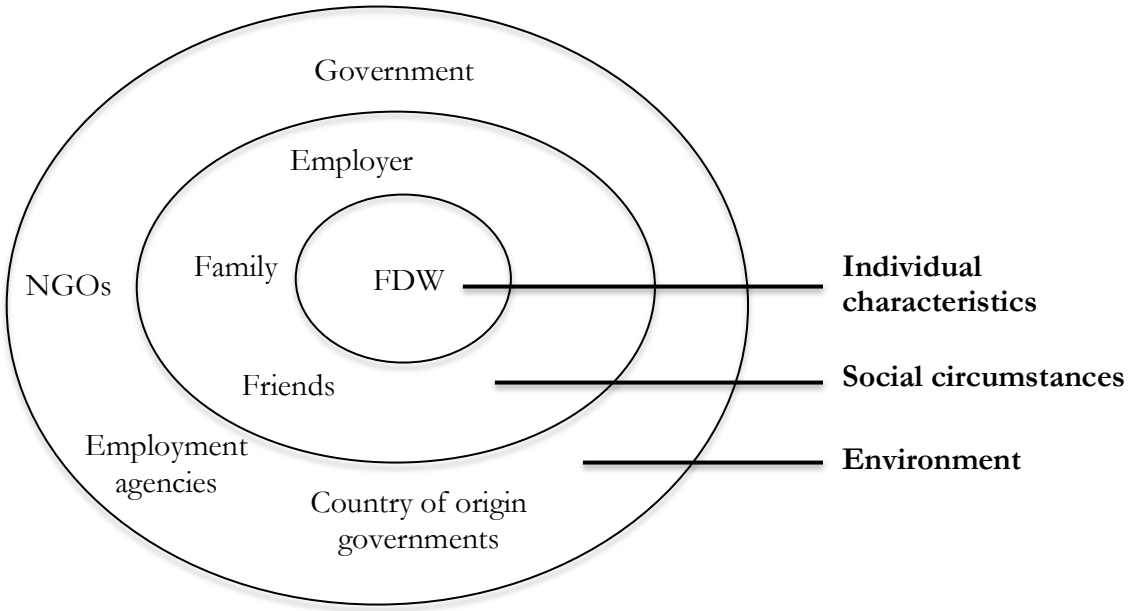
	Protective factors:	**Risk factors:**
Individual characteristics	• **A perceived integration into the employer's family** • Perceived privacy in the employer's house • A perceived treatment with dignity by the employer or employer's family • Satisfaction with the employer or employer's family and with working in Singapore	• Debt • Existence of chronic health problems • Family concerns • Homesickness
Social circumstances	• Sufficient daily sleeping hours • Their own room as sleeping accommodation • Nutritional attention and provision of sufficient daily proper meals by the employer • Adequate medical and dental attention by the employer • Frequent contact to friends/family outside Singapore or in home country	• **Language related communication barriers with the employer or employer's family** • Invasions of privacy by the employer or employer's family • Restrictions on communication by the employer or employer's family • **Verbal, physical,** moral and sexual abuse by the employer or employer's family

Note. Bold marked protective or risk factors are especially important (i.e. medium effect size).

4 Recommendations for stakeholders

This study focused on individual characteristics and social circumstances of FDWs in Singapore in its assessment of the factors associated with mental health. However, it is noted that mental health is also influenced by environmental factors. This includes the availability and accessibility of different protection mechanisms for FDWs. A combined effort by employers, employment agencies, the Singapore government as well the labor-sending countries is required to improve the mental health and work conditions for this vulnerable group of women. While employers and employment agencies can facilitate better mental health of FDWs by increasing the quality of working and living conditions (social circumstances), authorities can contribute on a broader environmental level.

Systemic network of relationships affecting FDWs' mental health



For the **employer**, improved mental health among FDWs means enhancing the basic infrastructure towards family life. Improving the quality of life of FDWs means less stress, which will increase their productivity. Additionally, there is the potential to create better trust and relationships between employer and FDW. Finally, if employers have confidence that they have competent assistance at home they will be more willing to expand their families.

Employment agencies will have better knowledge of the types of services and programs they can develop to improve the mental well-being of domestic workers. Improved mental health among FDWs will reduce costs through reduced turnover and improve customer satisfaction with both FDWs and clients.

Singapore is a key receiving country for migrant workers and often a role model for countries that wish to establish a migrant workforce. For the **Singapore government**, an improvement of mental health in FDWs would result in substantial economic advantages as results of, for instance, a reduced turnover rate of FDWs as well as reduced processing administrative and court costs (where applicable). Empirical evidence shows that emotionally happy people are more likely to be healthy, productive and socially connected. Moreover, an improved mental health of FDWs is beneficial to Singapore's strategy of increasing the population to 6.9 million by 2030 so as to "enhance work-life measures to help

working couples balance work and family commitments"[7]. Another benefit is that Singapore's reputation may be enhanced and the country may be seen as a desirable workplace for migrant workers and, thus, attract higher quality of FDWs. Further, better FDWs' mental health also improves the standing with foreign governments (from FDWs' home countries) and enhances diplomatic ties.

Overall, the study found an elevated level of mental distress among the FDW population in Singapore and clear relationships between FDWs' mental health problems and exploitative, restrictive and abusive working and living conditions. As a first step, different stakeholders can contribute to ***raising awareness towards a better protection of FDWs' mental well-being*:**

Employers could receive information about relevant correlates to the FDW's well-being as part of the mandatory Employers' Orientation Programme (EOP) before hiring a domestic worker for the first time. Awareness about mental health symptoms for employers could be incorporated during the one-day orientation session for employers conducted by the **Ministry of Manpower (MOM)** or incorporated in the online course.

Non-government organizations concerned with the welfare of migrant workers need to actively engage with the FDW community on mental health issues. In order to achieve this, we collected specific data within the context of this study about how to customize mental health treatment information and preventive education for this population. The next steps for HOME to improve the mental health of FDWs in Singapore include the implementation of information services based on data collected in collaboration with other migrant workers and mental health-related NGOs. For instance, Silver Ribbon (Singapore) has been conducting mental health talks for FDWs at HOME events and is offering complimentary counseling service to FDWs referred by HOME. Further collaborations with NGOs such as Silver Ribbon should be explored, which includes a) the introduction of a training program for FDWs to detect early signs and symptoms of mental disorders among their friends, to provide peer support to fellow workers and to manage their own mental well-being and b) the development of a handbook for employers and FDWs on ways to manage stress and their own emotion and a list of resources.

Country of origin governments are in a position to help secure adequate protection for their citizens and ensure that FDWs' mental health is protected while they are working in Singapore. As FDWs contribute significantly to the economy of sending countries, there is a need to ease the migration process. For instance, language issues are a significant risk factor for mental health. Country of origin governments can address this by mandating that FDWs receive at least minimal skills and language training before being deployed to Singapore. In this study, being in debt proved to be a significant mental health-related problem for FDWs in Singapore. Country of origin governments can manage this issue by requiring Singapore agencies to be licensed and prohibiting the charging of fees and loans by agents in Singapore and the source country, instead of imposing the cost of employment on FDWs. Pre-departure orientation programs in countries of origin should include information on (mental) health risks and the establishment of contact points for FDWs encountering such risks.. Further, the provision of information on access to healthcare prior to migration would be helpful. Foreign governments in FDW source countries could apply a strategy across borders and collaborate with NGOs (regional and in sending countries) and other relevant partners (e.g. the media) to enable the necessary changes in the system on migration.

Apart from the need to generally raise awareness, based on the findings, we derived the following key recommendations targeting different levels of factors influencing the mental well-being of FDWs in Singapore.

[7] National Population and Talent Division (2013). *A sustainable population for a dynamic Singapore.* Population White Paper. Retrieved from http://202.157.171.46/whitepaper/downloads/population-white-paper.pdf, p.21

Recommendations for foreign domestic workers

FDWs should be encouraged to be proactive and approach friends, family and organizations such as HOME for help when experiencing homesickness, distress, family concerns or a mental health problem.

Results from this study indicate that FDWs in Singapore have to endure sub-optimal living and working conditions. Additionally, the majority suffered from homesickness or experienced family concerns, which are risk factors for mental health problems. It is important to raise awareness amongst FDWs that they do not have to suffer in silence, especially for the Burmese FDWs, and to try to have frequent social contacts with their families at home (which proved to be beneficial for FDWs' mental well-being in this study).

FDWs should learn the language of the host family, most typically English and/or Chinese (Mandarin).

Language-related communication problems were one of the predicting factors for mental health problems, and a common problem, especially for Burmese FDWs. The HOME Academy offers English and Mandarin language courses for migrant workers, which may benefit not only their interaction with their employer or employer's family but also their psychological well-being.

Recommendations for employers

FDWs in Singapore have a very unique employment environment, as they work and live with their employer and employer's family. Thus, the employer is their main point of contact as reflected in the respondents' view that their employer is one of their key contact persons when faced with emotional problems. Findings have revealed that restrictive behavior of FDWs by their employers, such as restrictions of communication or invasion of privacy, and mistreatment of FDWs in form of nutritional neglect (especially for the Burmese FDWs), inadequate medical attention or (verbal) abuse, are significant problems and are detrimental to FDWs' mental health.

Employers of FDWs in Singapore should learn some useful phrases of their FDW's native language, maintain open channels of communication and strive to treat their employees professionally and with respect at all times.

Overall, the employer and their family play a key role in the mental well-being of an FDW in Singapore. The employer should be pro-active in communicating with the domestic worker to identify problems and difficulties she may be experiencing and working collaboratively to resolve these issues. They should be treated with respect to ensure they are effectively integrated into the family. With respect to food provision for FDWs by the employer, related research reveals the importance of direct communication between employer and employee, which often did not occur or was very limited. Explicit inquiries about nutrition, for instance the food perceived as appropriate for the FDW's culture and faith, could minimize conflict potential and thus increase the quality of the FDWs' life in their employer's house dramatically and in a straightforward way.

Employers of FDWs should ensure a full weekly rest day and limit working hours during the day for their FDWs.

The results have shown that long working hours and lack of rest affect the mental well-being of FDWs. While most employees enjoy their weekends off and have fixed working hours, FDWs in general do not enjoy such benefits. Singapore's Employment Act stipulates that rest days should be 24 hours in duration and employees should not work more than 72 hours of overtime a month (or no more than 10 hours a day for a six-day work week). We recommend that employers adhere to this standard to ensure the mental wellbeing of their FDWs.

Foreign domestic workers should not be deprived of a phone to maintain contact with friends and family.

Homesickness was one of the most important risk factors and a predictor for mental health problems. However, one-fourth of the participants were not allowed to make phone calls. HOME's experience shows that employers have argued that they do not allow the FDW to use her phone since they can be distracted from their daily work. It is important that the FDWs have access to a phone to be used after the daily work has been done and for the employer to trust the FDW the same way they trust them with taking care of their home and/or children.

Recommendations for the Singapore government

There are significant gaps in the content and enforcement of legislation related to FDWs, which can negatively affect their mental health. Thus, targeting these gaps has the potential to positively influence the mental health of FDWs in Singapore. Domestic workers are currently not covered by the Employment Act (EA), which provides basic protection, such as a standard number of working hours and rest days, wage and access to employment benefits. Extending the EA to FDWs and properly enforcing the Act can regulate FDWs' working and living conditions. FDWs are further excluded from the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA), which provides injured employees with a low-cost and expeditious alternative to common law to settle compensation claims. This is to ensure FDWs have comprehensive and equal benefits and protection should they be injured at work.

Domestic workers should be covered by the Employment Act and Work Injury Compensation Act.

Accordingly, we advise that the government review its current legal protections for FDWs, and take all necessary steps to improve their protection including, but not limited to, the steps listed below.

Set limits on FDWs working hours and ensure they are entitled to public holidays and annual leave.

This study has demonstrated that rest time is important for FDWs' mental health. Our data demonstrate that FDWs in Singapore work for around 13 hours per day and sleep for less than eight hours. Domestic workers are often responsible for the safety of their employers' children, the elderly and other family members. In addition to causing poor mental health, fatigue and inadequate sleep increase the risk of workplace accidents, as well as decrease workers' productivity. FDWs deserve to be protected from excessive working hours and to be paid for working overtime and on public holidays. The eight-hour day and 72 hours overtime limit in Section 38 of EA should apply to domestic workers, with overtime pay granted for work done beyond 44 hours a week.

Paid sick leave and adequate and comprehensive medical and dental care should be made compulsory.

Our data shows the significance of physical health problems as a risk factor for mental health problems as well as the lack of adequate medical and dental attention by the employer, which affected around half of the surveyed women. FDWs need to be adequately and comprehensively protected from having to work when they are unwell. Domestic workers deserve the protection afforded to other workers to receive paid sick leave. This could be subject to the requirements in Section 89, including the minimum length of service and examination by a medical practitioner. Further, employers have an obligation under the work permit terms and conditions to provide medical treatment for FDWs. We recommend that employers' obligations to provide medical treatment to FDWs are more strictly enforced. We also note that domestic workers continue to be unfairly excluded from the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA). FDWs, like other workers, incur injuries at work. These injuries often inflict great personal and financial costs on

FDWs, as well as contributing to the development of physical health conditions (a risk factor for negative mental health outcomes). Finally, addressing the disparity in medical coverage and to ensure (early) treatment options, doctors, social workers and other healthcare providers could include FDWs in national mental health programs such as the National Mental Health Blueprint (NMHB)[8].

The right to a weekly rest day should be strictly enforced and it should be 24 hours.

Domestic workers are workers as well as individuals with family ties and deserve adequate time off. Risk factors for FDWs' mental health included insufficient social contacts. Further, our data shows that more than 80% of the FDWs do not see their families yearly, and every tenth woman less than every two years. Homesickness also proved to be a significant predictor for mental health in this study. Only half of the study respondents had a weekly day off and 40% of FDWs had less than one rest day per week in a month. We recommend that the government takes measures to ensure that FDWs are given adequate rest days. Under the current Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) framework, the mandatory "rest day" can be replaced with salary in lieu of a day off. . This provision fails to take into account an FDW's comparative lack of bargaining power if/when negotiating with employers who are guided by employment agents. The imbalance of power is likely to lead to the FDW choosing financial compensation. In addition, the work permit terms and conditions should be amended to state that the rest day is a continuous period of at least 24 hours. Numerous domestic workers report being asked to prepare meals, clean, and wash in the morning and/or evening of their designated rest day. Domestic workers required to undertake any work during the "rest day" should be entitled to receive overtime pay for the time they work on these days.

Implement regulations, which protect domestic workers' privacy.

A noticeable finding of this study was the role of perceived privacy as a risk factor for mental health of FDWs. Additionally, more than half of the respondents perceived lack of privacy in the employer's house, one-third experienced invasions of privacy by their employer or employer's family and one-third of the cases in the employer's household was (possibly) equipped with surveillance cameras. One out of 10 every participants slept in inadequate accommodation, such as bomb shelter, kitchen or living room. The Ministry of Manpower currently advises that employers ensure that sufficient space and privacy are provided for their FDW in order to meet the standard of "acceptable accommodation" as required by the work permit terms and conditions. However, this requirement is vague. We recommend that the government release stronger guidelines, which are enforceable by directing employers to respect workers' privacy. Ensuring FDWs have their own rooms or ensuring partitions are installed in their sleeping areas are some examples the government should consider. We also recommend that the installation of cameras in worker accommodations should be strictly prohibited to maintain their dignity and privacy.

Take steps to make verbal abuse a reportable offence and communicate a zero-tolerance stance towards the abuse of FDWs in any form.

With respect to the treatment by the employer or employer's family, our findings show that half of the respondents reported to be verbally abused at some time. Abusive behavior by the employer or employer's family, both physical and non-physical, was a significant risk factor for

[8] Ministry of Health (Singapore), Institute of Mental Health, Changi General Hospital, KK Women's and Children's Hospital, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, National University Hospital, Singapore General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital & Health Promotion Board (2010). *National Mental Health Blueprint Singapore 2007 – 2012. Health minds, healthy communities.* Retrieved from http://www.imh.com.sg/uploadedFiles/Publications/IMH%20National%20Mental%20Health%20Blueprint.pdf

the FDWs' mental well-being. The Protection from Harassment Act was passed in Singapore in March 2014 and protects against behaviors that harass, alarm, distress or cause a fear of violence in others. A recent online survey[9] found that 24% of Singaporeans surveyed had experienced workplace bullying. The Act seeks to protect individuals against such incidences and, empowers victims of harassment or abuse to respond, providing a range of sanctions that they can legally enforce against the perpetrator. It is a broad step towards ensuring protection against abuse for all, whether in a domestic, workplace or public setting.

Enforce the right of domestic workers to hold their passport and identity documents without fear of retaliation from employers and employment agents.

According to this study, the majority of FDWs surveyed did not hold their own passport and employment contract. These findings highlight the widespread and problematic practice in Singapore of confiscating FDWs' personal documents. We recommend that the Passports Act and Work Permit regulations be strictly enforced to ensure the workers themselves hold these documents.

Allow domestic workers to switch employers freely without having to seek permission from their sponsoring employer.

In Singapore, FDWs are generally not allowed to change employers without the consent of their specified employer. The difficulties encountered by FDWs attempting to change employers act as a disincentive for workers to report ill-treatment by their employer. FDWs may endure situations of abuse or mistreatment, which are risk factors for negative mental health outcomes, because of the risk of losing their job and being required to leave Singapore. We advise that the government consider allowing FDWs to work in Singapore without being tied to one employer and to change employers without the threat of repatriation. Such changes have the potential to positively influence FDWs' mental health, as they will not be forced to endure abuse or mistreatment for fear of losing their jobs and their temporary home in Singapore.

Provide live-out options for domestic workers.

The Singapore government requires all migrant domestic workers to live with their employers. However, living in the homes of their employers has also meant that live-in domestic workers on average work far more hours than almost any category of workers. This also raises the expectation that they should be available around the clock. Insufficient daily rest is significantly related to mental health. In some cases, living in the employer's house also isolates the worker, making her more vulnerable to illegal confinement, physical and sexual abuse. Live out options allow domestic workers to take regular breaks and rest. It also facilitates the enforcement of the Employment Act as it is easier to determine overtime hours and limit working hours.

Inspect workplace conditions regularly, especially those of newly arrived FDWs, through visits and private interviews with migrant domestic workers, coordinating with and involving migrant workers groups, and employment agencies.

The first year of a FDW's employment is usually a stressful one as they are adjusting to life with their new employer and his or her family. During this period, they are also paying off their debts to recruiters and are not earning much money. This can cause considerable amounts of stress as they need to provide for their families back home. The Ministry of Manpower should continue its practice of interviewing newly arrived FDWs to check on their well-being. However, it should

[9] Goh, N. (2014, February 24). *Facing up to bullies at the workplace.* The Straits Times. Retrieved from http://www.straitstimes.com/the-big-story/case-you-missed-it/story/facing-bullies-the-workplace-20140227

work proactively with NGOs and other support groups in conducting these interviews, as many FDWs may not feel comfortable talking to government officials only.

Abolish the SGD5,000 [US2,950] security bond for employers.

The $5000 security bond places an onerous burden on employers to ensure domestic workers are repatriated and do not engage in 'illegal, immoral and undesirable activities', as stipulated in the work permit terms and conditions. Employers should not be held liable for the private behavior of their employees. HOME's contact with employers show that it is also one of the reasons employers restrict the movement of their FDWs and confiscate their passports. If the government is concerned about irregular migration and overstaying, current laws and regulations are sufficient to address these issues.

Regulate the excessive fees employment agencies charge domestic workers by strictly enforcing the two-month salary cap and disallow agencies from imposing 'loans' on FDWs.

Results show a relatively low monthly income of the surveyed women, whereby Indonesian and Burmese workers are paid the least compared to Filipino FDWs. Even when weekly rest days are taken into consideration, our calculations reveal that they earn less than SGD1.50 per hour. Debt was revealed as a significant risk factor for the FDW's mental health. In Singapore, almost all FDWs who are placed with employers by employment agencies will owe a debt to that agency. For the FDW, this means that she may not receive any salary for a number of months of employment. She is also tied to her employer because of this debt and cannot switch employers without consent. This can make FDWs particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In the event she is allowed to switch employers, she accumulates even more debt as she will be charged a fee for this switch. If she chooses to stay to work off her (imposed) debt, her mental health may be at risk. Legally, employment agencies may charge fees that amount to no more than two months of the FDWs' salary, as stipulated in the Employment Agencies Act. However, many employment agencies charge much more than that through the imposition of 'private loans', which the Singapore government turns a blind eye to.

Employment agencies in Singapore should create recommended pay scales according to work experience and other relevant qualifications, such as education, and to abolish discriminatory practices that determine entry-level wages according to nationality.

Our study has shown that domestic workers from Myanmar and Indonesia are among the least paid of all the nationalities surveyed. Evidence from our case reports has also shown that domestic workers from South Asia are also poorly remunerated. Singapore often prides itself for being a 'meritocratic' society. Therefore, wage discrimination by nationality should be universally condemned and steps taken to prevent it from happening. The Ministry of Manpower should establish a national minimum wage law to address wage discrimination by nationality and their vulnerability to wage exploitation. Employment agencies should work with the National Wages Council, government, trade unions and NGOs to recommend policies that promote equal pay for equal work.

The Association of Employment Agencies Singapore and CaseTrust should develop counseling and conflict resolution courses for its members and the attendance of these courses should be a licensing requirement.

Results have shown that poor mental health is related to various factors (such as employer mistreatment and poor communication), leading to poor inter-personal communication between employers and workers. Homesickness and stress caused by family problems are also significant contributing factors. Employment agents play a key role in assisting workers to adapt to life in their host family and resolving conflicts with their employers. However, many agents do not have skills in counseling and inter-personal conflict management. The Association of Employment

Agencies Singapore (AEAS) and CaseTrust should develop such courses and the Ministry of Manpower should make knowledge of such skills as a licensing requirement.

Bilateral and multilateral cooperation with source countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, should be promoted to ensure more effective protection of FDWs from the deceptive, coercive and abusive behaviors of employment agents and employers. Bilateral agreements, which formalize such efforts, should be signed.

The lack of bilateral agreements has led to the inconsistent application of laws and policies. For instance, countries of origin such as the Philippines have implemented the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) contract for all household service workers going abroad to work. However, because destination countries like Singapore do not acknowledge these contracts, it is not illegal to substitute these contracts when the workers arrive. A formal bilateral agreement between Singapore and the Philippines would ensure that measures implemented by one country would be upheld in the next.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development should provide resources to Family Service Centres and the newly established Social Service Offices (SSOs) to do outreach, provide counseling and social support for domestic workers.

Family Service Centres are often staffed with trained social workers and counselors. They are also conveniently located in residential areas where many FDWs work and live with Singaporean families. These community organizations should be given more resources to reach out to FDWs for social support.

Ratify the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention (C189).

The Singapore government should send a clear signal that all workers, regardless of occupation should have equal employment rights. Our study has shown that the working and living conditions of domestic workers are clearly related to their mental health. The Convention on Domestic Workers, formally the Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers is a convention setting internationally accepted labor standards for domestic workers. The ratification of this Convention will ensure that our laws will provide effective remedy for domestic workers who are vulnerable to labor and human rights violations.

5 Limitations and challenges of the study

We only had access to a **preselected group** of FDWs, which could lead to a selection bias. For instance, no inclusion of confined or 'undocumented' FDWs was given. Given that FDWs in more vulnerable and precious situations were not considered in this study, the assumption may be made that the results could be skewed towards a more positive scenario of FDWs' mental health and working and living conditions. For example, restrictions on communication or movement would be under-reported in our sample because those who are severely restricted were not available to come to participate in the study in the first place.

This study captured **self-reported data** only. No data from other sources, such as employers or employment agencies, to cross-validate results were collected. Thus, the common limitations for self-reported data apply. For instance, respondents may have given socially or culturally appropriate responses, especially with sensitive topics in the questionnaire (e.g. abuse by employer or levels of satisfaction respectively).

With respect to **measurement of mental health,** the critical question has to be asked whether the measurement of mental health in this study was appropriate for this particular population. Do the items capturing mental distress symptoms reflect mental illness or actual working conditions of FDWs in Singapore? For instance, the overall level of psychotic mental distress found within this sample suggests the need for professional treatment when compared to a reference group. Psychoticism was measured via statements such as "feeling lonely even when you are with people", "never feeling close to another person" or "the idea that something wrong is with your mind". Further, the relatively highest levels of distress were experienced related to the statements "having to check and double check what you do", "your feelings being easily hurt" or "feeling lonely". All these items also could reflect social isolation within the FDWs' living situation or controlling or verbally abusive behavior by the employer (in terms of insults). In any case, the results provide insights into FDWs' perception and feelings, which is what matters most.

This study was the first of its kind in Singapore and is of an **exploratory nature.** Thus, we may not have captured sufficient relevant data. For instance, there is a need to specify and elaborate on certain information, such as whether "not being allowed to make private phone calls" applies within or outside working hours. Finally, as this research is cross-sectional, no information could be obtained about the mental health status of FDWs over time. More research is needed in this area, such as a study on the onset of mental health issues (whether it is before, during or after their employment in Singapore). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that FDWs in Singapore are especially vulnerable with respect to their mental well-being and there are clear associations between their mental health and exploitative, restrictive and/or abusive working and living conditions. In summary, this study provides deeper insights into the mental health of FDWs in Singapore and serves as baseline measure for future research.

Acknowledgements and further information on the study

Anja Wessels, research consultant (volunteer) at HOME, was the lead researcher and main author of the report.

Oversight of the research process was provided by Bridget Tan (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, HOME) and Jolovan Wham (Executive Director, HOME).

Prof. Kayoko Ueno (University of Tokushima, Japan), Wesley Tan (Macquarie University, Australia), Prof. Truls Ostbye (Duke University, United States and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore), Asst. Prof. Rahul Malhotra (Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore), Dr. Thein Than Win (HOME) and Dr. Yasmin Lalani (HOME) provided research, mentoring and guidance in the analysis of the results. An interdisciplinary approach was adopted to increase health care providers' understanding of the factors which influence foreign domestic workers' (FDWs) mental health in order to better understand, prevent, detect, mediate (where appropriate), and advocate for FDWs who experience mental health problems. This collaboration of researchers seeks to draw insights from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds and facilitates the critical examination of the results.

Research assistance was provided by Nicole Fraser, Nelly Maria van Amerongen-Broers, Ho Han Yao, Katarina Lindgren Cortes, Brendan Chia, Victoria Haldane, Alice, Sabine Lyko, Yudhy Widhyanto, Chia Irenaeus Paul, Isrizal Mohamed Isa, Juliah Bee, Mel Jarvis, Ray Webber, Yulianti S. Yudo, Sherly Piedragoza and Baby Foo, all of whom contributed as volunteers to the study design, data collection, data entry, questionnaire and data translations, analysis of the results and/or writing this report.

HOME staff, especially Sisi Sukiako, Celine Dermine and Jacqui Field, provided further research assistance in recruiting participants, conducting the study and providing legal advice.

We are grateful for the support from our partners and stakeholders, namely the Singapore FDW community, the NGOs Silver Ribbon, HealthServe and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), and the Ministry of Manpower. Their valuable feedback and content expertise shared prior to the release of this research have enabled us to derive meaningful recommendations for different parties.

A special thanks goes to to all FDWs who volunteer with and/or helped HOME with this research project, specifically HOME Roses, HOME Kartini, Tun Lin Thein, Htwe Htwe Nge, Hnin Thawda Thwin, Barani Maung Maung, Tin Maung Win, Kitty Aye Mar Mar, Khin Lay, Lamin Lwin, Khin Pyone Nwe as well as the women in the HOME shelter, especially Yanti, who dedicated their time helping with recruitment of participants for this study.

We would also like to pay homage and dedicate this report to all 670 women who agreed to participate in the study and contribute to HOME's mission to improve the protection of migrant workers in Singapore.

The **study questionnaire** and the **full research report** are available on request. Please contact lead researcher Anja Wessels at anja.wessels@home.org.sg to obtain further information.